嘘つきみーくんと壊れたまーちゃん

幸せの背景は不幸

入間人間
イラスト†左

電撃文庫

Usotsuki Mi-kun to Kowareta Ma-chan - Volume 01 Chapter 01-03

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Novel Illustrations

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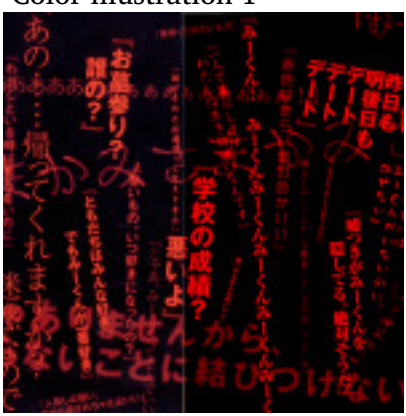

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Chapter 1: Reunion and Exultation

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The light scared me.

When the light from outside crept in, many scary things came too.

But when I got hungry, I wished it would come.

“I’m hungry.”

“…Me too.”

“I wonder when dinner is coming.”

“Not until it’s night.”

“…But if we’re in here all the time, we can’t tell when night comes.”

“…I hope it comes soon.”

From then on, words were not exchanged.

Instead, stomachs rumbled in protest.

The two of us gazed blindly into the dark.

Until the light slipped in through the darkness and crept its cold fingers across us.

“Just say that the principal’s name is ‘Fujiwara Mototsune,’ the student council president is ‘Sugawara Michizane,’ and the teacher in charge of year 11 is ‘Tachibana Hiromi.’ Something like that, anyway,” I said. [0]

“And how does that appeal to anyone in any way whatsoever?” Kaneko retorted， dismissing my idea with a loud sigh. I wanted to sigh too. I could have racked my brains all day and still not have come up with a satisfactory answer to his question.

Kaneko was the class-rep in charge of the welcome pamphlets which would be distributed to the freshmen entering the school in the coming year. He had been going around the classroom asking for input on positive features of the school he might include; I, his current victim, had been caught near the entrance to the classroom. The problem was, our school – no, our town even – was just a small place in the countryside with nothing worthy of mention. The names of the school staff were perhaps the only things out of the ordinary about our school, strange to the point of sounding as if their parents had intentionally named them in that manner as a joke. That was my best attempt at coming up with an idea.

“What else is there… Maybe you could mention how one of our students was butchered the other day…” I added.

“I can’t do that,” Kaneko answered with a sour expression. Perhaps it had been imprudent of me to even suggest it.

“Then why not just write something like, ‘We have an open and free school atmosphere,'” I concluded, my contribution a second-rate answer lacking in both originality and depth. Kaneko gave a wry smile, as if silently complaining that he’d heard that idea one too many times already, and sighed.

“It’s not like I even wanted to do this, you know? I really need to get to my club activities, after all.”

“Club activities? Haven’t they been suspended because of how dangerous it is at the moment?”

“Not our club; particularly since the tournament is almost here. There’s simply no way our club captain would accept a ban on club activities. No, we’ve got training going on clear ‘til midnight. Unofficially, of course.”

As Kaneko played the part of an elementary school kid proud of

staying up late, a girl appeared behind him – Misono Mayu, a classmate of ours. Pushing her way past Kaneko, who was blocking the entrance, she walked out into the corridor.

“Hey. Wait,” Kaneko called out.

Misono-san turned, and as if to contradict the calm and cool impression she usually gave, she subjected him to a withering glare. “What?”

“Um… Aah…” Kaneko, intimidated by her belligerence, forced a sloppy smile and looked away. He looked to me for help, but I ignored him, my gaze continuing to linger on Misono-san.

“What?” she repeated. Her face had twisted in obvious displeasure.

Misono Mayu was quite pretty. No, to be honest, she was beautiful; actually, let me correct that again – she was gorgeous. In my opinion, anyway. In short, she was quite desirable. Full marks.

Traces of brown ran through her medium-length hair, exposing the fact that she had once dyed it brown, but had since grown bored of it and reverted to her original color, black. The long sleeves of her shirt, peeking out from under her blazer, were out of place in the terrifically humid weather of October.

“Sorry, but I have plans,” was her blunt reply.

Misono-san always exercised an excessive politeness when interacting with her classmates, a stance that rejected others. However, as I saw it, this was a manifestation of her wariness of others. To me, Misono-san seemed like a small, scared animal.

“Sorry for stopping you. If you’re in a rush, then don’t worry about it,” I replied in Kaneko’s stead. *I see*, she mumbled, heading directly toward the stairway with steps both quick and unsteady. Kaneko, watching her retreating figure, relaxed his shoulders and heaved a deep sigh of relief.

“Was Misono always that intimidating?” he murmured.

“I don’t know… Perhaps she’s practicing to be the oni at

Setsubun[1].” My nonsensical reply notwithstanding, I was nearly one-hundred percent sure I knew what the actual reason was. Kaneko’s head was cocked in puzzlement; that’d been his state for quite some time now.

“Plus, these days, she leaves so early…” Kaneko glanced back at the classroom with suspicion. Mirroring his movements, I peeked back at the room out of the corner of my eye. Between those who were cramming textbooks into their bags and those who had stayed behind to chat with their neighbors, there were still many students left in the room. In that respect, especially considering the fact that Misono-san’s desk was the furthest from the exit, it was fair to say that she had indeed left rather early.

“I’d say that that’s pretty normal if you’ve got plans, though.”

“Every day?”

“Sure. Maybe her mom’s in the hospital or something.”

As if.

“Anyway, even if you were to ask, you’d likely only get some generic answer.”

Kaneko scratched his forehead, his moment of curiosity having passed, and finally straightened his neck.

“Yeah, you’re probably right. But I have to say, that so-called ‘open and free school atmosphere’ just doesn’t seem all that accurate when you’re looking at her.”

“True enough.” I gave a half-baked reply. It was, not in fact, true. Despite how easy it would have been to rebut his comment, I’d decided that agreeing with him had been the most effective way to cut our conversation short. “Well then, it’s about time for me to go as well.”

“Alright, see you tomorrow.”

We waved lazily at one another, and I turned to make my way down a corridor permeated with lukewarm and stagnant air, a

product of the tepid afternoon sunlight. Quickly, I stepped through the still corridor, casting occasional glances at the class next door, and raced down the stairs, skipping every second step. At the building entrance, I watched as Misono-san clumsily changed her shoes. As she passed through the school gates, I counted to ten before following, making sure to keep my distance. My plans for this afternoon involved playing detective.

Recently, this town – with its utter lack of alluring features – had had the pleasure of multiple mentions on national television, which had drawn to it no small degree of attention. Mostly from the police. This had all been due to two recent incidents of note. Well, I say two, but chances are that the two incidents were perpetrated by the same criminal, and so it's up to the individual to decide whether or not to treat them as two separate incidents.

The incidents I speak of were a serial murder case and a missing persons case. These heinous episodes had haunted the town for the past few months. The serial murder case in particular had been all the more shocking given that murder in this town was such a rare event that the last instance of this crime had been in the period when samurais roamed the lands brandishing their katanas. Well, that might be a bit of an exaggeration. It was definitely a once-in-eight-years incident, though.

It had all begun when a middle-aged man in his forties had been found dead beside the community center, his corpse a complete mess. Though, technically speaking, the exact cause of his death had been the chunk of flesh torn from his chest, he'd been savaged in other ways as well. His eyes had been gouged out, the fingers of his left hand had been severed, and half of one of his ears had been sliced through. It was speculated that his wounds had been the result of a game the murderer liked to play, and society naturally fussed over the murderer's mental condition. The next victim had been an elementary school child who had not lived to see their seventh birthday. In this particular instance, the body of the child was found with a face so deformed by the countless stab wounds inflicted upon it that it had been utterly unrecognizable. As a result, all elementary school children were strongly encouraged to travel to

and from school in groups, and school ended around midday as an extra precaution. The residential association, along with the police, made regular patrols of the neighborhood in an effort to dispel the threat posed by the murderer. In spite of these precautionary measures, however, there had been no progress made in unveiling the identity of the perpetrator, let alone their arrest.

The other incident that had taken place recently was the disappearance of a pair of siblings. A fourth-grade boy and his second-grade sister had gone missing around sunset one day. Although, of late, there had been numerous warnings against wandering outside after dark, they had apparently been to little effect in this instance. Unlike the victims from the other cases, however, the corpses of the two had never been discovered. This anomaly had led people to hypothesize that this was instead a kidnapping incident, and not a murder. The police, without leads on either case, were hard-pressed to determine whether or not the crimes had indeed been perpetrated by the same individual. I had, however, read recently in a weekly magazine that the police had finally decided to treat these events as two separate incidents. The magazine in question had highlighted the kidnapping case in an attempt to forcefully tie it to a case from the past.

"……"

Twenty minutes had passed since I'd first started tailing Misono-san. Unfortunately for me, this was the first time I'd ever attempted to shadow someone else. I am ashamed to admit that I am but an amateur; I had no prior experience as a stalker. I was thus having great difficulty grasping the correct distance to maintain when tailing her. The thought that "I should have bought a book on this and read up" crossed my mind, accompanied by a pang of regret. I was far enough behind that her figure was the size of a dictionary when seen from my perspective. As the unbroken countryside scenery held nothing but rice fields as far as the eye could see, there was a decided lack of cover I could hide myself behind should she turn around. I needed to build up the courage to leap into a water canal on the off chance she decided to look behind her. Fortunately, Misono-san never seemed to worry about what was behind her as she hurried home. Her pace – which she likely believed to be quite

brisk – was, in fact, rather unsteady. Despite not suffering the effects of a fever, she nonetheless swayed from side to side as she walked.

Eventually the road became a paved path, and the number of houses we passed as we walked gradually increased. As I reached this new area, I began to feel as though I had crossed the threshold into someone else's life.

Up ahead, Misono-san wiped the sweat from her cheeks and nape. In this sweltering weather, where even the short-sleeved summer uniform would not have kept its owner cool enough to avoid sweating, she must have been roasting. Yet her pace never slowed, and slouching ever forward, she made her way. On the way, an elderly man walking his dog greeted her politely, but apparently his presence never breached her tunnel vision and she completely ignored him as she continued on. Feeling pity for the man, I gave him two small bows as I passed, one for her and one for myself. The elderly man gave me a puzzled look before dropping his gaze to his dog, as if it might have held answers he sought.

"…It's further than I thought," I mumbled to myself. We had traveled far enough that it seemed more sensible to bike to school than to walk. However, I knew that she was incapable of riding a bike. Her sense of balance was crippled, as was her sense of depth perception. It was for that reason that she had to grip the handrails when ascending or descending the stairs. When playing volleyball, she rarely managed contact with the ball. Basketball was worse still – she caught passes with her face and her shots almost never touched the backboard, let alone the rim of the basket.

…Let me make this clear now – that I am in possession of such knowledge is certainly not due to any form of stalking. Indeed, while my current actions may seem very much like stalking, they are, in fact, two very different things.

At long last, we entered the residential district. This rural land, purchased at great cost by the landowners of the country, now advertised "For Sale" signs on all the lots. On that note, these signs had been here for some years now, yet I had no recollection of the number of signs ever decreasing – a spectacular failure. The

company should've first considered whether or not they could imagine themselves enjoying life in such a barren backwater before greenlighting such a project.

Misono-san, after passing through the cluster of deserted houses, headed to the supermarket on the other side of the intersection. As she crossed this road without a traffic light, she accidentally hooked her right foot on her left leg and stumbled. I clenched my fist and restrained myself from jumping out to catch her. Misono-san, on the other hand, simply continued to stagger her way over to the supermarket. There were but a scant number of customers at the flower and vegetable stands outside the store, possibly due to the time. Instead of following her in, I waited for her outside as I pretended to contemplate what to buy at a nearby vending machine. A young man who had just finished refilling the vending machine moved out of the way as I walked towards it.

"……"

The missing children – of both the current incident and the previous one – were students of an elementary school nearby. Eight years before there had been another missing persons case. A man in his thirties had kidnapped a boy and a girl, both in their third year of elementary school, and had confined them in his house for over a year, abusing them both physically and sexually. The case had eventually ended with the death of the man. This new case, which closely resembled the last, had the town murmuring about the appearance of a second "kidnapping man." In other words, it was widely believed that this wasn't just a missing persons case, but rather a kidnapping. I, however, found the rumors off-putting. It felt terribly discriminatory that the kidnapper was simply assumed to be male. If the motive behind the kidnapping was money, for example, then it could well be a woman. Actually, even if the kidnapping had been born of the desire to maim and kill, the perpetrator could still be a woman. Such prejudice is disrespectful toward women. So much for gender equality.

As I waited for Misono-san, I sipped the cold tea I'd purchased from the vending machine and contemplated the many issues facing society.

"……"

There have been twisted comments made which insinuate that since, according to stereotype, only women spent a ridiculous amount of time shopping, a man spending similar amounts of time should be considered feminine. However, the moment you experience the wait for yourself, such views start to make a lot more sense.

"……Where is she?"

I drained my seventh bottle of tea, and tossed the empty bottle in the trash. At this point, I'd begun to feel quite queasy. My forehead throbbed like it had the time I'd nearly drowned in a pool. For the last forty minutes, I'd been hovering around the vending machine and pouring tea down my throat. The young man who'd been stocking the vending machine came back as part of his route and stared at me, taken aback by the unchanging and, frankly, suspicious scene. Perhaps I struck him as someone who might be a kidnapper. I smiled like a good citizen might. That might have given him the impression I was a murderer instead.

Twenty minutes after my heartwarming exchange with the young man, that is to say, after having enjoyed an hour-long teatime, Misono-san finally exited the building with a bag in her left hand. The fact that the amount of time she had spent and the amount of items she had bought were clearly mismatched caused my heart to sink. Admittedly, it might also have been the tea churning in my stomach. I hid in the shadow of the vending machine in order to avoid being seen by Misono-san. The apples protruding from her plastic bag heeded the call of gravity multiple times, falling from her bag. Misono-san, pausing a number of times to gather fallen apples, returned to the intersection and proceeded to waddle across the street while hounded by a cacophony of car horns. I quickly crossed the road after her, deliberating all the while on the course of action I'd take if she were run over: would I rush to her aid or would I race off in the opposite direction?

Misono-san turned right after the intersection, taking her to the center of the newly-built residential area. Amid the forest of apartment buildings stood her apartment, where she lived alone.

Ignoring the many apples falling from her bag, Misono-san disappeared into the poorly-painted, light blue apartment building. After collecting her abandoned apples, I looked through the window and, confirming that she had boarded the elevator, passed through the automatic doors at the entrance. After walking through the hall connecting to the corridor, I came across a bright, open yard covered with turf. I had previously observed that the first floor housed a handful of stores including a CD store, a bookstore, and a manga cafe. It was an impressive building indeed, and was thus out-of-place for this town, let alone as the domicile of a single student. Grateful for the lack of an auto-lock on the entrance door, the building's sole country-esque feature, I raced up the emergency stairs on the side of the building to the elevator's destination – the third floor. I opened the light blue door and peeked out into the corridor of the third floor. Misono-san had already arrived at her room, room 307, and with her bag resting on the floor beside her, had inserted her key into the keyhole.

From my vantage point, I saw that she struggled with opening the door, for she repeatedly turned her wrists before pulling the key out and putting it back in again.

From the fact that she had not made any stops besides the supermarket, I deduced that returning home had been her main objective. If that was truly the case, I would've liked to have invited myself into her home, but there was a major obstacle impeding my plans: the lock on her door would naturally hinder my entrance. Nor did I have any plans to play burglar, if but for one reason – I lacked the ability. Furthermore, it seemed extremely unlikely that Misono-san would unlock the door and grant a visitor entry.

…That left me with but one option.

If opening the door on my own was infeasible, then I simply needed its owner to do my work for me. In the meantime, it seemed that Misono-san had finally managed to unlock the door, and she retrieved her key from the doorknob with a wipe of her brow. As she slowly opened the door, I mumbled, "It's time," and physically stepped past the point of no return. I trotted toward her, naturally and casually picked up her bag with a "Let me get that for you," and continued on into her home.

“……Huh?”

As Misono-san struggled to process what had just occurred, I proceeded into the entranceway with calm composure whereupon I carelessly threw off my shoes and walked toward the living room, making my steps as loud as I possibly could.

“Hey! Where do you think you’re going?!” Misono-san yelled, but I paid her no heed as I entered the neatly maintained living room. On my eighth step, I flipped around and took a bite of one of her apples without asking.

“This room looks both spacious and clean, doesn’t it? But I see some dust on top of the TV. Perhaps it only looks clean because there’s not actually much furniture in here?” I questioned as I turned to face her, only to find that the expression adorning her face had shifted from shocked to murderous. Her eyes had narrowed, as if to cover the glint in her irises, and she clutched an empty vase tightly in her grasp. She probably meant to use it as a weapon. That definitely wasn’t the correct attitude to take when welcoming a classmate.

“What are you?” she hissed.

“I’m not a what. I’m a who. I’m your classmate,” I answered flippantly. As I rolled my half-eaten apple onto the table, I scrutinized the back of the room out of the corner of my eye. In one corner of the concrete-built, Western room was a tightly-shut, dark-red fusuma door[2], denying entrance to the room laying behind it. From the looks of the structure, it seemed to be a Japanese-styled room.

“Um… Can you go home? You’re inconveniencing me,” Misono-san commented, doing her utmost to appear composed, yet utterly failing to keep from glancing at that room every few seconds. Were I an elementary school teacher, I would applaud her honest demeanor.

“If you’d like, I certainly could go home. But I’d like to hear what the other party has to say before doing anything.”

“…I don’t know what you mean.”

“This is what I mean,” I replied as I turned to the Japanese-styled room. An instant later, I heard the creak of strained floorboards and instinctively jumped to the side. I grabbed the sofa and somersaulted over it in an attempt to place some distance between us. From where I now stood, I could see that my previous position was currently occupied by both a vase and an electric self-defense weapon, both in the hands of Misono-san.

“That’s a bit excessive, really. It’s a real shame you failed, though. That was even your last chance too. You really should’ve attacked me right as I passed through the entrance.”

With this distance between us, there was no possibility of her attacks succeeding. No matter how infuriated she might be or what weapons she might wield, she had ceased to be an object of fear. Misono-san stared at me with a poker face, yet the anger radiating from her could be felt from where I stood. Holding her pen-shaped stun gun at chest level, she shuffled slowly across the floor, giving no signs she planned to plunge toward me out of sheer rage.

“Do you know?”

“Obviously.”

Obviously I didn’t know a thing, that is. I didn’t know what Misono-san had been speaking of, nor did I know what justice was, nor social morality, nor ethics, nor Misono-san’s favorite thing, nor how to socialize, nor even the nutritional information of an apple.

There was no way I’d know all that. Well, one of those was a lie.

“Don’t bother. Even if you pulled out a machine gun, I’m confident you wouldn’t be able to kill me.”

Did I ever mention that I love to bluff?

Misono-san moved to block my path to the room. Her overly honest attitude which prevented her from lying had me wondering how she managed everyday life.

“It must really be important to you. Maybe it’s the room that’s important. Or maybe you’ve got something stored within that affects your social standing, reputation, or financial assets. Could it perhaps be something fatal to your position in society?”

Without going into specifics, I probed the issue with my words, failing to get a reaction out of her. I concluded that it was time to stop playing around. I had no way of gauging at what point madness would claim her. Moreover, I had not come to visit Misono-san today just to bully her. And I certainly hadn’t come to confirm her sins.

“It’s been a while,” I said. Like a magician revealing his tricks, I spoke her name.

“Maa-chan.”

Misono-san’s stun gun and vase hit the floor. Her shoulders shook in silent sobs, which, to an outsider, may have suggested she had been the victim of bullying. She, like a baby deer seeking its mother, took an unsteady step in my direction. Her pupils quivered and her shaking intensified.

“Do you remember me?” I asked. My voice was faint; my words had been spoken almost unconsciously.

“Mii…kun?”

…The name echoed in my ears, triggering a wave of nostalgia. It had been eight long years since I’d last heard that name.

“Maa-chan.”

Misono Mayu’s shoulders shook violently. I embraced her thin and bony body, as if to still her quaking. A feminine fragrance mingled with the smell of sweat to fill my nostrils.

“Mii-kun….?” she murmured once more, still unable to believe what was happening.

“There, there.”

“Mii-kun.”

“There, there.”

“Mii… kun…”

I rubbed her back like a mother comforting a forlorn child. That was all she needed to break down completely.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!”

Mayu burst into a waterfall of tears, as though she had suddenly and abruptly broken down. The deluge of cool teardrops ran down her neck and shoulders and collected in a puddle which soaked her surroundings.

“Mii-kun! Mii-kun, Mii-kun, Mii-kun, Mii-kun, Mii-kun!”

With her back still supported by my arms, Mayu continued to repeat that name again and again before finally crumpling to the floor, tears still racing down her cheeks.

She wasn’t just any old classmate to me.

Together we had been tortured. Together we had been broken. And together we had gone mad.

A relationship desired by none.

Misono Mayu and I had been victims of the kidnapping eight years ago.

Thirty minutes later, we had cleaned up the fragments of the vase and things had calmed down.

“I’m sorry. I just wanted to tease you a little,” I apologized. We were seated on the sofa as I stroked her hair. Tears continued to escape Mayu’s eyes. She pouted in disapproval but did not complain

as I embraced her.

“Mii-kun, you jerk. You almost gave me a heart attack.”

“I could say the same.”

She had indeed come close to stopping my heart, not to mention mere inches from caving my head in and shattering my bones to a fine powder.

“I’m going to confiscate this.”

Dangerous things shouldn’t be left in the reach of children. Mayu didn’t react as I collected her stun gun from the floor; it seemed she no longer cared.

“Idiot. Moron. Mii-kun, you dummy.”

Mayu’s vocabulary seemed to have regressed to that of a child’s. The calm and composed façade she maintained at school had vanished without a trace.

“Why haven’t you said anything until now?” she asked.

“I didn’t notice until recently. I didn’t know your full name, after all,” I lied. However, my answer did nothing to dispel her displeasure.

“Liar. We used to play together all the time when we were kids. There’s no way you wouldn’t notice.”

“Wow. What shrewd judgment. What a clever girl.”

Patting her on the head, I sidestepped her suspicions. It wasn’t that I couldn’t tell her why, though; it was simply because she likely wouldn’t have understood.

“Mayu, you have such a small head. Almost like an…”

Mayu interrupted me mid-sentence with a finger to my lips. Turning, she shifted in place to face me.

“It’s not Mayu – it’s Maa-chan,” she declared, releasing my lips.

“Don’t you think you’re too old for a nickname like that?”

“No! You have to call me Maa-chan!”

Mayu flailed her limbs like a child throwing a tantrum, though saying that she had, in truth, reverted to a child’s mentality was likely more accurate.

“And ‘Mii-kun’ sounds like a cat’s meowing.” My complaints continued.

“What’s wrong with cats? Do you have a problem with this?”

Of course I do, I thought.

“Mii-kun is Mii-kun, and Maa-chan is Maa-chan. That will never change!”

The desperation of her pleas, reinforced by the weight of her tears, imbued her request with profound gravity. Giving in to the situation, I nodded my assent.

“Yeah, you’re right. The name ‘Mii-kun’ brings to mind a blue robot, and Maa-chan sounds like some mascot,” I babbled.[2.5]

“Yes, yes! Mii-kun, you’re a genius!”

Her tear-filled face taut, Mayu reached over and patted me on the head. Some part of me recognized that I was making a critical mistake, but my mind proved incapable of devising any possible alternatives or solutions. Objectively speaking, it would have been strange to calmly come up with ideas in a situation like this anyway.

“I’ve been waiting for sooo long. For the day when Mii-kun would reenter my life with a grand entrance, and call me ‘Maa-chan,'” Mayu added.

“Oh… I see.” Encouraging… it was not.

"…Oh yeah. Do you mind if I take a peek at what's in that room?" I asked, turning my head to the Japanese-styled room.

"Of course not!" Mayu exclaimed as she pulled herself off me. The second I stood, however, she twined her arms around my neck and hung on my back. It was a little stifling, but the konaki-musume[3] rode piggyback as I moved toward the Japanese-styled room, all the while praying that my guess was wrong. Never hesitating, I wrenched the fusuma door open. The room's only contents were the two children that had been kidnapped.

"…Hmm," I murmured, closing the fusuma door and making a U-turn straight back to the couch. Once seated, I turned the television on. The screen showed a couple enjoying a date at the amusement park on a weekday. They rode the ferris wheel and the boy sniffed his girlfriend's shoes. Mayu bounced onto my lap and I altered my breathing patterns to compensate.

"I don't like mushy dramas," Mayu remarked. She snatched the remote from my hands and pressed '8.' The television switched to a variety show, but I resolved myself to deal with the elephant in the room before I got too comfortable.

"Maa-chan," I called, running my fingers through her hair, half-resigned to the hopelessness of the situation.

"Did you kidnap those kids?"

"Yep!"

Mayu answered cheerfully and freely, as though without a care in the world. Her face beamed with pride as she met my eyes, as though begging for approval and recognition. I wonder how I'd react if that were indeed the case? I might just give her a pat on the head.

"Mii-kun. Hey, Mii-kun. Why don't you stay here as well? Let's live together."

I affected an air of ignorance, pretending that I hadn't understood what she meant by "as well." "Don't make requests and demands in

the same breath," I countered instead.

"So? So? How about it?" Mayu prompted, eyes bright with expectation. I wondered if her personality at school was all a mask. The actions of the "little girl" before me were too natural to be anything but real.

"Let's see… Living together would mean sharing the same house, right…?"

As students, expectations were that our relationship remain pure. That, however, didn't seem likely to apply if the person in question was already dirty. I also needed my uncle's permission as he was technically my guardian.

"We'll go to school together, and eat dinner together, bathe together, and go to bed together. Doesn't that just sound wonderful?" Mayu prompted.

"Yeah, that sounds all well and good, but what about living costs?"

"I'll pay, don't worry!" She tempted me with the life of a kept man. But I didn't mind. The situation was only going to be temporary anyway.

"I'll discuss it with my uncle today. If he says no, I'll just run away."

I reached a childish conclusion. Mayu, on the other hand, seemed convinced that this was going to happen, her eyes lost in a dream-like state.

"Ahh, I wish I'd known about this earlier. Then we could've been in the same group for the class trip." Her disappointed tone was a mismatch for the joyous expression on her face. I played along and showed a downcast look. A false one.

"Okay, that's enough of that sickly sweet topic for now," I said, cracking my neck. The Japanese-styled room had followed expectations. Misono Mayu was indeed one-half of the two mysteries plaguing this town. Now that I had confirmed my suspicions, however, I was at a loss for what to do next. The fact that I had already presumed as much notwithstanding, witnessing

firsthand the accuracy of my prediction had still come as a shock.

“Isn’t something like living together meant to be a joyous occasion? And yet I’m coming into this with nothing less than a crime hanging over my head…”

I wanted to pull my hair in frustration. And then I’d throw my head away and exchange it for a new one[4].

“Nya nya? Are you okay? You look as pale as death.” Mayu, who had stopped daydreaming, began poking my face instead. Gazing directly at my face as she mumbled childish words like “nya,” she passed a moment in contemplation before clapping her hands in an epiphany.

“You’re hungry!”

“You’re right… There’s no end to my problems; I might as well fill my stomach…”

This was no time to collapse under the burden of the problems weighing me down. The hour hand of the clock above the television pointed just past five, while its minute hand hovered over the eight. Uncle and Auntie would have finished eating by now.

“Mii-kun, you always eat so much,” Mayu observed, much the way a mother would to her son. She hopped off my lap and, arms akimbo, stood between me and the television. “So I, Maa-chan, shall make you a meal!” she announced with pride. With the light of the television behind her, she seemed positively divine, and I nearly fell to my knees in reverence.

“Please do.”

“So what would you like to eat? I can make anything.”

“Then anything you don’t like sounds good to me.”

On reflex, I made a biting rejoinder. Maa-chan’s tears, which had only just stopped, welled up in her eyes once more.

“I’m joking, it’s a joke. An Esperanto joke. I want what you want,

Maa-chan. What makes you happy makes me happy. Honestly."

It was a compliment so hollow it was verging on being as shallow as the girls that loiter around Shibuya. Nevertheless, Mayu's tears subsided as she proudly declared, "Leave it to me," and ran off to the kitchen without stopping to put her slippers on.

It was super effective.

Mayu's arrival in the kitchen was heralded by a dull thump. I followed after her to see what had happened. At first glance, the room appeared well-kept, though in truth it was anything but. The manner in which utensils were organized was completely incomprehensible. Who keeps their knives with their chopsticks?

Mayu was retrieving her apron from a shelf. Blushing, she draped the apron over her uniform and shyly presented herself to me.

"What do you think – does it suit me?" she prompted, glancing up at me. I couldn't think of a suitable compliment so I hugged her instead. That seemed a satisfactory substitute.

"Mii-kun, I like you sooo much."

By the time I released her from my embrace, Mayu's face was tinged with red and her expression had bloomed into an attractive smile filled with charm.

"So when do you want the wedding to be?"

"Wait. What?"

All of a sudden, ours was a matrimonial relationship.

"Wouldn't it be great if our first was a girl?"

Children now? Things were escalating faster than in the "Hand of the Heavenly Bride."[4.5]

To stave off any further development in our relationship, I glanced around for a potential distraction. Though there was nothing in the kitchen that might serve, I remembered a question I had planned on

asking.

“What about the kids’ dinner? Are you planning to make some for them too?”

Mayu left my side to pluck two pieces of bread from a bag hanging off the fridge.

“This is for them,” she explained.

“…No. That’s not enough.”

“What? Why not?”

“Just because. You can cook right? At least give them something decent.”

Mayu’s gaze dropped in obvious displeasure. Venomously, she squashed the bread in her hands.

“It’s fine. This is how much we got. No, actually, we used to get even less. I’m even giving them all the water they want.”

“That’s true, but…”

Her standards had hit rock bottom.

“You brought them here of your own accord, so you have to do at least that much. Don’t you remember how much we suffered from hunger?” I decided to add. In our case, we were even forced to “perform” for food.

No, food’s the wrong word. Even after exhausting ourselves “performing,” the most we’d ever managed to scrounge together had been but mere scraps. It was ironically appropriate for us, who were basically animals.

Mayu nodded in agreement, though her expression was one of naked disappointment.

“If Mii-kun says so…”

“It’s not a demand, Maa-chan – it’s a request. I want you, of your own will, to feed them. It goes without saying that – since it’s just a request – you can turn it down.”

My words, filled to the brim with counterfeit kindness, made me sick. The truth was, I knew that if I phrased things that way, she was incapable of denying me. The depravity of my heart disgusted even me.

“Okay, but… oh, I know – then Mii-kun, you have to listen to my request too.”

Mayu’s smile renewed itself, as if she had just come up with an ingenious idea. While, technically speaking, I was free to reject her wish since it was just a request, but what good would it do if I permitted logic to trample my emotions to such an extent? I gave her a nod.

“Woohoo! Just give me a second!”

Tossing the pair of flattened bread pieces on the kitchen island, Mayu opened the refrigerator door with great enthusiasm. After watching her for a few moments, I left the kitchen with the bread in hand.

Reaching into the bag I had left lying on the sofa, I extracted my cellphone. Scrolling through my contacts, I selected a number I had come to be very familiar with. Auntie answered almost immediately and I explained that I was going to have dinner at a friend’s. Auntie was probably eating her favorite – dried squid – as incessant chewing noises sounded over the receiver as she gave her approval and told me to come home as early as possible. After returning the phone to my bag, I continued to sit on the floor and, closing my eyes, relived all that Mayu and I had shared in the past. For ten long seconds, memories flashed through my mind, filling me with horror.

Concluding my business, I slid open the doors to the Japanese-styled room. I made my way to the center of the room, pretending I

hadn’t noticed the gazes focused on me, and turned on the lights.

“Nice to meet you, I guess?”

I attempted a smile similar to that of a children’s educational TV show host for a favorable impression, only to realize that, in this place, smiling was beyond me. As I took in the cramped, if now brightly-lit room, an oppressive stench assailed me. The overpowering scent invaded my nostrils and the instinctive desire to cover my nose overwhelmed me. The two had neither showered nor had their clothes been washed since they’d arrived here, and since the bucket that served as their toilet had been left uncleaned, it was no surprise that the room reeked so powerfully. I closed the fusuma door behind me to quarantine the smell and prevent it from leaking. Choked by the polluted air as I was, it was a Herculean task keeping a straight face.

Of the two residents of the room, the older brother watched me through fearful eyes while the younger sister glared at me, her already thin eyes narrowing even further. Their only common point was that their legs had been cuffed to a nearby pillar. Small cuts on both the pillar and their legs stood as evidence of previous attempts to escape. Brother and sister both held their breath, their mouths shut tight in a grim line. I sat down before them with perfect posture. It was a habit of mine to sit politely when meeting someone for the first time. The older brother’s gaze revealed a look of shock at my politeness.

“Ikeda Kouta-kun and Ikeda Anzu-chan, I imagine?”

I studied their faces as I called their names. The older brother shook his head up and down, as if he felt fear in the form of gravity, answering my query. His sister, on the other hand, kept her gaze on the wall, stonewalling my attempts to converse with her. Well, that was only natural.

“You can call me Onii-san[5]. Onii-chan is also an option, of course.”

“Uh… right,” Kouta-kun mumbled.

“But my name’s a secret,” I added, attempting to turn my plain character into a mysterious one. Ignoring the wary look in their eyes, I dangled the bread in front of their faces.

“Are you hungry?”

“Er, um, y-yes. Actually, no…” Kouta-kun gave an unintelligible answer. Anzu-chan, seemingly unable to watch any longer, finally opened her mouth to speak, her eyes never leaving the wall.

“Duh, we’re hungry. We haven’t had a bite to eat since this morning. Hurry up and hand that over already.”

Her tone held naught but naked frustration and aggression. Without hesitation, she reached for the bread. I placed the bread in her small hands. Anzu-chan tore the already tattered bread to pieces, as if about to feed some koi[6] in a pond. She must have been checking for something, but the bread held neither custard, nor chocolate, nor poison.

“We’ve also made you some real dinner today,” I said.

Anzu-chan’s bread autopsy came to a halt as she turned to me, her eyes widening in surprise.

“Um, what do you mean?” Kouta-kun asked. His face was filled with anxiety; anticipation was nowhere to be found.

“The girl that kidnapped you is making dinner at the moment. I don’t know what she’s making, though.”

“Making what? Dinner? What’s in it? Poison? Or are you gonna make us eat cooked cockroaches?” Anzu-chan demanded. That confirmed my suspicions of her previous act being a check for poison. That wariness of hers left a good impression on me. So much so that I wanted to bully her a little. On the other hand, Kouta-kun watched on anxiously, likely worried that his sister would anger me.

“Poison and cockroaches, huh… Well then, Anzu-chan—”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Ikeda-san, then. If I were to serve a dish with either of those in it, would you eat it?”

“Of course I wouldn’t.”

“What if I told you I’d kill if you didn’t?”

“If I ate it, I would die either way anyway.”

I shook my head. “That’s not what I meant. If you don’t eat it, your brother’s the one who dies,” I corrected. Kouta-kun’s body jolted. Tears welled up in his eyes. Anzu-chan cast a look of contempt at her pathetic brother.

“It’s easy to make a unilateral decision when the consequences are yours to bear alone. However, you need to think about who else your decisions will affect; you have to take responsibility for your actions.”

For example, my responsibility for Mayu.

Upon hearing this, Anzu-chan lowered her head, her glower having lost its sharpness. Kouta-kun, watching us both, interceded.

“Um, I’ll eat it, so…”

“Hmm?”

“I’ll eat it so, um, please don’t say things like that to, um, Anzu.”

Stammering as he spoke, Kouta-kun nonetheless managed to convey his strong will. His gaze pierced through me, leading me to realize that he was indeed an older brother. Anzu-chan, unable to hide her surprise, clung to Kouta-kun’s arms with teary eyes.

“Please don’t bully Anzu,” he repeated.

“……”

His words set aflame what remnants of a conscience I had left to me, cutting me deeply. Children can be so relentless sometimes.

“I don’t want you think of me as the kind of trash that enjoys toying with people’s dignity and lives. It was a rhetorical question. Forgive me. Please don’t take it too seriously,” I apologized, prostrating myself.

“Uh, I, I’m sorry too.”

Kouta-kun mirrored my action. Naturally, Anzu-chan did not.

“It’s your fault for asking something like that,” she muttered. The ones who actually do such things are the ones at fault if you ask me, but I kept that to myself. There was no need to continue such a conversation any longer. It wasn’t that I hadn’t gotten anything from the exchange, but rather that my heart would give out under the strain they were placing on my conscience before I got any further.

They must’ve been starving, for they tore into the bread which Anzu-chan had examined – more like pulverized – in silence. Despite the absence of verbal communication, I could tell from the way they faced each other that they treasured each moment they shared with one another.

I simply sat, my legs crossed, my chin resting on my arm, observing the two.

The older brother, Ikeda Kouta, was in the fourth grade of elementary school. His skin color was impossible to determine, hidden under a layer of filth as it was. He had a thin body and hair that reached his eyebrows. Though he was the elder sibling by a gap of two years, he seemed quite leery of his sister’s moods. It seemed, however, that it did not stem from a fear of his sister, but rather from excessive affection. In my mind, that was a pass. The younger sister, Ikeda Anzu, was in her second year of elementary school. She, too, was covered in grime. Her shoulder-length hair was curled upward; perhaps she had slept on it. She was a jumble of obstinacy and pride, which was reflected in her mature manner of speech. This pair that Mayu had kidnapped looked considerably thinner than they had appeared in photos in the papers, though there were no bags under their eyes.

“Mrm, whut?” Anzu-chan scowled, struggling with the food in her mouth. The sight of her glare, seen alongside her cheeks packed as full as a squirrel’s, was heartwarming indeed.

“I was just thinking that sisters are kinda nice.”

Anzu-chan blushed, her cheeks still bulging with food, and looked away. Or not. Actually, the glare she directed in my direction grew more menacing still.

“I’m not, mm, your shister,” she grumbled, squeezing the words through the food in her mouth.

“You’re right. But when you see a dog, you wouldn’t feel the urge to kill it, right?”

“Mmnh? What?”

“You really are a good girl, aren’t you?”

Irked by the smug look on my face, Anzu-chan forced the rest of the bread down her throat so she could tell me, “You’re gross.” Kouta-kun choked, and lowered his head in apology on behalf of his sister. What a sight we must have made – an easygoing kidnapper and his apologetic victim.

“Anyway, now that you’re full, I have something important to talk to you about,” I said.

“That only made me hungrier,” Anzu-chan retorted.

“Anzu, shush.” Kouta-kun hushed his sister with a word of caution. I glanced at the two faces and continued to speak.

“I have a request. I would like you to say that I was the one who kidnapped you. Forget about the girl that actually kidnapped you. Make no mention of her existence. If you can promise me that, then…”

I went on promise them that I would free them if they accepted my request. It was a lie. Honestly, there had to be something terribly wrong with a person if they could believe something as shady as

that. If someone were that trusting and gullible, they wouldn't survive long in this world full of deception.

Eventually, I would have to kill these two.

The dead tell no tales after all.

I would act just as the rumored murderer would.

"U, um," Kouta-kun raised his hand.

"How might I be of service, Kouta-kun?" I gave a flowery reply.

"When you say you'll 'free' us, do you mean that, um, you'll let us go?"

"That is indeed what I mean."

"Oh… I see. T-Thanks, I guess…"

The words leaving Kouta-kun's lips seemed reluctant, almost as though he had no desire to leave. Surprisingly, even Anzu-chan looked less excited than I'd expected. It was almost as if they'd gone out of their way to get kidnapped.

Kidnapping is subjectively worse than murder. When someone is murdered, their suffering ends with their death. In a kidnapping, however, the victim continues to be haunted by the incident long after they've been freed. They have to continue a life replete with insanity.

Even though it's beyond repair.

Even though it's worse than death.

They have to keep living.

They continue to be kept alive.

Forced to grapple with societal norms that have long since fallen outside their ability to comprehend.

…Damn it. Erased, it is not.

“So how exactly did you guys end up here?” I asked in a bright tone that masked the spite behind my question.

“We were, um, playing outside and then she came, and, uh, brought us here…” Kouta-kun hesitantly answered, casting Anzu-chan an uncertain glance. Anzu-chan, despite facing the other way, had her hand on Kouta-kun’s. I nodded and pretended I understood. Inwardly, however, I was screaming ‘objection!’ [6.5]They were playing outside even after the string of recent murders? I highly doubted that. The news had reported that they had gone missing during the afternoon, so they had indeed been outside at the time. But it was highly unlikely that their parents would’ve simply allowed them to leave the house to go play… I think.

The irregularity in his story was firmly lodged in my mind, but I decided it would be better not to involve myself.

“What are you doing in here?” The fusuma door crashed open and a bitter voice called out to me from behind. I turned to find the cold and composed Mayu from the classroom holding a frying pan in one hand. Her attitude, fitting for a seventeen-year-old, created the illusion that her age regression just fifteen minutes ago had all been a lie. A quizzical expression on her face, Mayu stepped into the room and stumbled on the tatami mats. I hurriedly caught her and was rewarded with a dry, “Thanks.”

“My pleasure,” I replied, with pointless decorum. I glanced over at the contents of the frying pan.

“It’s yakisoba[7].” Mayu held out the pan with a bright smile; it was either her favorite food or a dish she felt confident making. The aroma of the sauce, mixed with the smell of the room, forced my hunger to subside.

“Let’s get something to put under the pan…” I suggested.

Unfortunately, Mayu seemed to not comprehend my Japanese, as she set the frying pan directly on top of the tatami mats. A burning hiss, accompanied by the smell of burnt grass, reached me. This room was now nothing less than a veritable symphony of putrid odors.

“Let’s eat in the kitchen,” Mayu said, tugging on my sleeves. Gently, I rejected that idea.

“We’ll eat here.”

“Why?”

“Because you were cooking for them as well, right?”

Mayu lips parted, words of dissent at the ready. Fortunately, she restricted her response to a slight exhalation. Her attitude making it abundantly clear that she was unhappy about the situation, Mayu nevertheless obediently took a seat and handed me a pair of chopsticks. With my eyes, I urged her to hand some chopsticks to the other two as well. Mayu obliged by roughly tossing them into their laps. For a time, the two simply blinked in surprise. That did not last long, though, as the siblings gave in to their hunger and turned to me for the go-ahead. I gave them a nod and scarcely a moment had passed before they were reaching for the frying pan with their chopsticks.

“Be careful; it’s hot.”

The two seemed not to hear as they had their heads in the frying pan. They probably would’ve tucked in even if it had been poisoned. They didn’t even give me a chance to get some for myself.

“Delicious!”

“Yeah, it’s so good!”

Even Anzu-chan offered honest praise as she greedily inhaled her food. Any normal person would be overjoyed that something they had cooked was so appreciated, but Mayu was abnormal. Clearly irritated, she watched the two devouring the food she’d made, all the while grinding her teeth and gripping her arm so hard her fingernails bit into her skin. I was worried that she might scream at them, but she did nothing of the sort. No, Mayu was not that meek a girl. Instead, she slowly raised her chopsticks. What happened next made me feel faint with shock. With great force, she swung the tips of her chopsticks down toward Anzu-chan’s head in an attempt

to impale her.

“Stop!” I cried, extending my right hand to obstruct the chopsticks. Maa-chan’s colorful chopsticks pierced straight through the top of my palm and out the back of my hand.

“…Ow…It looks like an alien has forced its way out from my hand….”

“…Mii-kun?”

Mayu looked first at the chopsticks protruding diagonally out of my hand, and then at me, a puzzled look occupying her face. The siblings, too, stared at my hand, though they never stopped eating. Those kids must have hearts of steel… or maybe just a ravenous appetite. Mayu didn’t react until blood started gushing out of my wound.

“I’ll get something to dress the wound,” she said, rising to her feet. Her tone was so light. She clearly had no sense of guilt whatsoever.

“There’s no need for anything that drastic; I’ll be fine with a band-aid…”

“No. If you get germs in there, your hand will get all bubbly.”

Bubbly, huh. I wondered what that would be like. Would it be my flesh that would “get bubbly” or my skin?

“And I’ll also make dinner just for you.”

That wasn’t really what I wanted to hear. When you’re offered food other than what everyone else is eating, it feels like you’re being discriminated against. I stopped Mayu as she was about to exit the room.

“You don’t need to make anything for me. I don’t want to trouble you.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble.”

Well, it’s trouble for me.

“I’ve had enough for now. You know I’ll… uh… be having you tonight anyway.”

Regret washed over me the moment the words left my mouth. Embarrassment dyed my face a deep crimson, and my face felt hotter than it had ever been. The children stared daggers at me and their look of censure hurt far more than my wound. I looked over at Mayu, half-fearing her reaction. Albeit unnecessarily, for she wore a demure expression. She grabbed my hand, complete with two new fingers branching out from my palm, and pulled me outside the Japanese-style room. Closing the fusuma door behind her, a radiant smile blossomed on her face.

“Really?”

“And what might you be referring to?” I replied as a gentleman might, for God only knows what reason.

“So, so, you’ll have me? Today? Tonight? Woohoo!”

It was far more effective than I could ever have imagined. She’d thrown her arms into the air in celebration. *Does sulphuric acid run through the brains of young maidens?*

“Um, we can discuss that later on… C-Can we get some band-aids first?” I did my best to divert focus to the chopsticks that were making themselves at home in my palm. I wasn’t sure whether my ploy worked or not, but Mayu nodded with a smile and raced off like a dog going after a bone. After seeing her off, I walked back into the Japanese-styled room and sat down where I’d been seated earlier. With my free hand, I took hold of the objects growing out of my hand.

“Ow, geez. It’s grazing the bone. Ouch, ow ow. Ah— it slid out. This is giving me goosebumps.”

I removed the chopsticks from their temporary home while making a racket by myself. A red dome of blood surfaced on my palm, dyeing the creases of my palm dark red. Licking my hand in an attempt to keep the tatami mats clean, I felt the weight of a stare on my person, so I glanced over to my side. The stare belonged to

Kouta-kun, but what really surprised me was that the yakisoba was entirely gone.

“Um, thank… you.”

“For what? You should thank Onee-san[8] instead. She’s the one who made the food so your appreciation should rightly go to her.”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” he replied. “You protected Anzu,” he continued, with a shy smile and a small bow. His attitude made me feel that he’d grown more attached to me. Anzu-chan, on the other hand, feigned ignorance as she scoured the pan for remaining scraps of yakisoba. Laughing, I told the two not to worry.

…I guess the relationship Mayu and I shared was one where a situation like this was laughable.

There really weren’t any words to describe it.

As soon as I finished treating my wound, I hurriedly left Mayu’s house. Although it was difficult to leave when faced with a Mayu with tears in her eyes, I didn’t have the luxury of allowing my life to revolve around hers. Half of that’s a lie, though. As I left her apartment, I was chilled by the frigid night air, the wind making me shiver a little as it blew.

“…What an eventful day.”

It had been a day which had stunk as much as hydrochloric acid. I glanced at my hand, now densely wrapped in bandages. Mayu had returned only to cheerfully announce that “There’s no more band-aids!” and, despite her ignorance of medical matters, had attempted to dress my wound. The number of bandages used had been the only part of the treatment that could be considered first-class. I pulled them off, though the smell of medicine seemed to have already ingrained itself onto my hand. Today seemed to be the day of bad smells.

“I can’t say I ever expected to be involved in a kidnapping again…”

Only this time, I was the kidnapper. The only relationship where positions should ever swap is that of childhood rivals. The pair of siblings who had been kidnapped also occupied my thoughts. As I'd observed and interacted with them, I'd been struck with the impression that something was off. There existed a contradiction somewhere – it seemed to me that they had accepted their situation far too easily – but I was having difficulty putting my finger on exactly what it was that bothered me.

"…Wait."

I had forgotten to ask something I had been meaning to ask. My gaze flitted back to the apartment building, lit up by the night lights in each room. Like shadow art, its intimidating presence seemed to amplify the darkness around it.

Oh well, I'll ask her tomorrow. It hadn't been terribly important either way and I didn't feel like turning back just to ask. Plus, I had the feeling that if I did go back, Mayu would've forced to me to stay the night. My aunt would've beaten me over the head with a stone lantern if I'd done that.

So I'll ask her tomorrow. If I remember.

Why did you kidnap those children?

The Eighth Incident [the subconscious murder]

I like chicken skin. I also enjoy salmon skin, as well as the cheek meat of sea bream. Were I to rate these highly in isolation, though, I must admit such an approach would be rather lacking in decorum. To do such a thing would be comparable to carving off the ears of a person, and then proceeding to judge those ears to be of greater value than the individual themselves. Utter foolishness. The person would yet have their eyes, their mouth, their limbs. Someone who failed to enjoy these to their full potential can only be described as profligate to the extreme. I, however, do not find the least pleasure

in either cannibalism or arts and crafts that use parts of the human body. Let us thus depart from this topic and instead consider matters of greater import to my future. Oh, he died. I am a firm believer that a foundation built upon views coming from all angles is vital to avoid building a house upon the sand. Truth be told, I would love nothing more than to ask another to share their thoughts with me. Someone like me. Someone with the same habits as me. Someone who sees things differently despite standing where I stand. To sit down at a cafe, with another of my kind. This has been the desire of my heart ever since I reached the limit of what I could achieve by thinking on my own. One concern, however, did weigh on my mind. If I really could find another like me, would things really end with just casual conversation? If I must be honest, I have something of a short fuse, and I also can come on a little too strong when it comes to those I like, which can be discomfiting. Furthermore, it wasn't unusual for me to begin dialogue with a fight. I thus hesitate to seek out kindred spirits. I'm scared. Scared of looking in the mirror. Scared of swinging my fist at a reflection of myself… For better or worse, I have not yet come across anyone like myself. To date, I have only chanced upon one like me just once, and that for but a scant few seconds. Perhaps my kind hide themselves like a species hunted to endangerment. Even if there are undoubtedly a vast number of us. I enjoy midnight trips to the convenience store and music sung by a pretty girl. If someone also boasted the compulsive tendency to kill in addition to skill at hide-and-seek, then we just might be the same kind of person. Well, I guess I can compromise when it comes to music taste. Even if they preferred male vocals, I'd still welcome a comrade with open arms. That's how desperate I am. Even if I were to receive the most suspicious of e-mails, one that hinted at the location of one like me, my brain's protestations notwithstanding, my legs would take me to the spot in question. Today, as I made a visit to the local convenience store while on the lookout for someone similar to me, I found my enemies patrolling the vicinity like savanna predators. I wish to simply coast through life on my way to becoming a full-fledged member of society. Or so I hope, anyway.

Translator notes and references

[0] Every character named here is named after someone from the Heian period.

[1] Oni of Setsubun: The oni is an ogre-like demon depicted often in Japanese art and fables. Setsubun is a Japanese festival held just before the beginning of spring which plays host to a ritual for cleansing evil, represented by the oni.

[2] Fusuma: traditional, rectangular Japanese doors that slide, rather than swing, open and shut.

[2.5] The blue robot refers to Doraemon, whose girlfriend was Mii-chan. The mascot refers to the baseball team Chiba Lotte Marines' mascot, Maa-kun.

[3] Konaki-musume: a pun on "konaki-jiji," which is a type of Japanese youkai. "Jiji" means "old man," while "musume" means "young girl."

[4] Anpanman: this is a reference to Anpanman (アンパンマン), a Japanese picture book series, and later, cartoon for children.

[4.5] This refers to dragon quest 'hand of the heavenly bride'.

[5] Onii-san: a polite, yet amiable way to refer to a young man. Alternatively, Onii-chan. (Can also be used to refer to one's older brother.)

[6] Koi: a colorful, ornamental variety of carp often kept in outdoor koi ponds or water gardens.

[6.5] This is a reference to the game Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney

[7] Yakisoba: a Japanese noodle dish that is derived from the Chinese chow mein.

[8] Onee-san: a form of address that is the female analog of "Onii-san."

* For further information, the respective Wikipedia pages offer greater detail.

Chapter 2: Parents and the Diagnosis

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“I wonder what everyone else is doing.”

“Who’s ‘everyone’?”

“Like Nagase-san and Kawataki-san.”

“School friends?”

“Yep.”

“Then they’re probably going to school like normal.”

“I wonder if they’re worried about us?”

“I’m sure they are.”

Somewhere in my heart, though, I knew they probably weren’t.

“What about my mom and dad?”

“…I’m sure they are too.”

Our conversation stopped there.

Almost as if to forget what we had just talked about, we both fell asleep.

I awoke at seven, when the morning sun was at its brightest. I passed the gates of our school long before school was due to begin, on my way to Mayu's apartment. Today marked the beginning of our life together. Overcome by excitement, I'd risen bright and early, like an adult on the morn of the release of a game he'd been awaiting for the past twelve years. Actually, that's a lie.

I simply did not want to face my night owl of an aunt, who was a nurse. The second I'd stepped through the door the night before an intense fight had begun. She'd casually denied my right to live and threatened to suppress my fundamental rights as a human. My compassionate uncle, a doctor, stepped in before the fight turned physical. He gave me permission to take my leave on the condition that I find my way home once a month. Auntie, on the other hand, had been strongly against it from the first. Her overprotectiveness

might have been a flaw, but she certainly wasn't as terrible a person as I.

"I wonder if I'm too early…"

I rode the elevator to the third floor, where I approached her room before pausing at the door. Mayu was a girl accustomed to sleeping a great deal. When it came to school, for example, she generally arrived at least an hour late, whereupon she would promptly rest her head on her desk and continue to sleep.

"I know I promised to come get her, but can she really be up already…?"

I rang the doorbell, even though I wasn't really expecting an answer. *If she doesn't answer, I can just wait out*— The door opened wide, slamming into my face.

"Wha— Ow!"

The impact that had failed to express itself verbally instead manifested itself as a red liquid that poured from my nose.

"Hi! Mii-kun!"

I pinched my nose as Mayu greeted me energetically.

"Hello?"

Mayu observed my face intently, the smile never leaving her face. Suddenly, she began to forcefully wipe the blood flowing through my fingers with the sleeves of her pajamas.

"Don't worry about it; you'll dirty your clothes," I interrupted.

"It's okay. Mii-kun's look just fine," she replied.

The blue and white stripes of her pajamas were joined by a third color. Seeing this, Mayu smiled, entranced.

"…Just how long have you been waiting here?"

As goosebumps ran along my skin and cold sweat peppered my back, I reluctantly sought verification of my suspicions.

“Since yesterday,” she replied calmly.

“…Yesterday?”

“Yesterday.”

“…What time yesterday?”

“I showered right after Mii-kun escaped – just after that.”

It had been seven in the evening when I’d left.

“You’ve been waiting here? By the door?”

“Yep.”

“And what were you doing exactly?”

“Sleeping.”

“……”

Well then.

I guess our relationship will hinge on whether I tear up at her admirable sense of loyalty or shiver in a corner at her fanatical devotion. Without giving the matter any thought, I decided neither were for me, business as usual for my contrarian self.

“I guess I should’ve come earlier. Sorry,” I said, expressing an insincere apology. Brightly, Mayu told me not to worry and, pouncing, embraced me.

“Mii-kun,” Mayu murmured affectionately as she buried her face in my chest.

…Wait? I had something I wanted to ask this overly affectionate cohabitor of mine…

“Mmn? You smell like soap.”

Mayu smelled sweet as well. Her bewitching fragrance caused the reminder to question her to fade from my mind.

“I like morning baths,” I replied. Truthfully, it had been my first ever. I hadn’t had time to bathe last night.

With Mayu still glued to my person, I walked inside. Mayu didn’t bother to ask whether or not I was moving in; indeed, there wasn’t much point in asking – there wasn’t any need to hear my answer after all.

I walked into the living room I’d idled in the day before and left both my school bag and my gym bag, my change of clothes within, on the floor. Sparing the Japanese-style room a quick glance, I found the fusuma door sealed shut. I marveled that the children had not gone mad despite being trapped inside all day.

“Breakfast?” Mayu inquired, still clinging to my arm.

“I haven’t had anything yet,” I replied.

“No, I was asking if you’d prefer bread or rice?”

That I was to have breakfast with her seemed a foregone conclusion in her mind. *If not, I’ll eat you with chopsticks, like I did last night* – I imagined her saying. I guess these thoughts of mine make me a crazy person.

“Bread, then. This is a Western-styled room, after all,” I answered, my reasoning fallacious and my words nonsensical. Mayu voiced her understanding, though she remained glued to my arm, unmoving. Given the look of satisfaction on her face, I guess I passed muster as a body pillow. We collapsed on the sofa and turned on the 32” TV.

“This is my first time watching TV in the morning,” Mayu commented.

Neither a rare event nor one that hadn’t occurred for some time, but rather one that had never happened before.

The screen showed a familiar scene – our town. A large-lettered

caption appeared on the screen: “Mass Murderer Yet to be Caught” – a title utterly lacking in originality.

“Someone was killed last night too.”

“Yeah. I mean, sure it’s dangerous, but people die all the time. I don’t see why they have to make such a big deal about it,” I responded. I’d known of the latest incident since the day before.

The victim was the president of the Residential Association who’d been out on patrol. Having finished his shift, he’d been murdered in the intervening five-minute period before the next person came to relieve him. The cause of his death had been fairly orthodox: he’d died of his stab wounds. One wound, however, was anything but – a large hole had been found in his temple. The murder had taken place at about eight in the evening, near the elementary school. Once again there had not been any witnesses, leading some to conclude that this was a crime without a criminal, its cause supernatural. This was, after all, a town that had barely any experience with murder. Well, up until half a year ago, anyway.

“It sure is scary though, right— Mayu?”

My flimsy opinion failed to provoke any reaction from Mayu, her gaze intent as she stared at the CRT display, the smile gone from her face and her eyes dull.

“…It’s been a while,” she murmured, drowning in nostalgia, the prospect of which I found more repulsive than the thought of sticking a bare limb into a bucket crawling with maggots.

“Hey.” Mayu suddenly looked up at me. Her dead eyes peered deeply into mine. “Did Mii-kun do that?” she continued.

Talk about out of the blue. A question with neither reason nor rhyme. The question mark at the end of that line had been essentially meaningless.

“No,” I lied. “Maa-chan, you detest murderers more than anything in this world, right?”

“Yep. I hate them.”

Mayu's mouth formed another smile. She proceeded to position herself on my lap as if protecting my legs from an unknown enemy, and rubbed her cheek against mine.

"And I l× ×e Mii-kun more than anything in this world."

"…Yay."

Naturally, it would take far more than that to do me in.

"Ohhh? Mii-kun's cheeks are getting hotter. And you have goosebumps."

"……"

Okay, I lied.

"L-Let's eat already. I'm in the mood to ingest some wheat."

I was flustered beyond belief. Mayu, with a triumphant expression, patted my head with a "Sure, sure." It was humiliating to be treated like a child by a child. Though I was immune to both the word 'like' as well as physical contact, the word 'love' was my Achilles' heel. I forced a scowl to avoid embarrassing myself further.

Mayu parted from me and walked off to the kitchen as if sleepwalking. She looked like she'd settled down considerably compared to yesterday, as she didn't run. I called out from behind her.

"If… if I *was* the criminal, what would you do?"

Mayu turned, watching me in puzzlement.

"What do you mean, 'what would you do?' "

I don't know. Take me to the cops or something? Maybe think "you're a pervert, and gross to boot" or "go kill yourself, idiot," or…

The dismal exiguity of my imagination prompted self-pity. I'd failed to come up with anything more than common insults, and ones

made by elementary school children at that.

“Ehh, iono…” Mayu muttered in broken Japanese, walking off. “Then what would Mii-kun do if I were to drop dead right now?”

A voice reached me all the way from the kitchen. Despite the soft volume of the uttered words, they resonated loudly in my ears.

“I would never think about such a thing, so I can’t say.”

“Yep! It’s the same for me!”

Oh, now I get it!

I had no clue what her words meant, but affected by Mayu’s overflowing confidence, I decided I understood. It wasn’t like I’d meant anything by the question in the first place, and so it was fine this way.

I grew bored waiting for Mayu to finish preparing breakfast, so I slid open the doors to the Japanese-style room. As anticipated, the dark room was steeped in a foul odor that no one could possibly enjoy. Covering my nose with my hand as I entered the room, I discovered that my nose had stopped bleeding.

Within, the two siblings were asleep side-by-side in a corner of the room. Kouta-kun covered Anzu-chan, as if to protect her, while his sister had curled into a ball like a cat luxuriating in the afternoon sunlight.

“Oh?”

Though it was an adorable sight, the muscles on my face refused to budge. They moved only for certain things. What things? Fun things, of course. Though that’s a lie.

I exited, headed for what I figured had to be Mayu’s room, a room I had yet to see. Crossing the corridor, I pulled the door open; the sight before me made me want to cover my eyes rather than my nose. Textbooks were strewn about willy-nilly, and her bedding had been crumpled into a ball and left in the corner. Gadgets both gaudy and arcane formed a pyramid on the desk, prevented from

fulfilling their intended function. Because Mayu did not read, there were neither books nor magazines to be found, let alone a bookshelf.

I hopped over the mound of textbooks and opened her closet; a sigh escaped me as I did so. The clothes within had been roughly thrown one atop another, heedless of the wrinkles that would inevitably form. Digging through Mayu's clothes, I secured a shabby-looking blanket. I brushed off the layer of dust that had collected on it, and left the room with the blanket in hand.

"I guess the reason the living room's clean is because she wasn't using it."

I returned to the Japanese-style room, musing on the pointlessness of a living room that was never "lived in." I unfolded the blanket and attempted to lay it over the two, when Anzu-chan's fox-like eyes suddenly reacted.

"…I don't need it," Anzu-chan murmured, her eyes still half-closed. "I don't need alms from a kidnapper…"

Good for you, knowing a word like "alms."

In the absence of immediate physical need, her spirit of defiance held strong as it had not with dinner the night before. With that said…

"Unfortunately for you, the only charity you're going to get any time soon is going to come from kidnappers, so you're just going to have to deal with it."

I lay the blanket over the pair. Anzu-chan's objection was muffled by the blanket. "I told you I don't need it," she said.

"If I believe you, your brother might catch a cold. Are you really okay with that?"

Anzu-chan's mouth snapped shut and her gaze strayed. She obediently crawled under the blanket. I took that as passive agreement and turned to leave.

“Thanks…”

Her voice had been softer than the quiet buzz of an insect; perhaps she had not intended for me to hear. Unfortunately for her, however, in the silent stillness of a countryside morning, it might have been wiser not to have spoken at all.

“…That’s for yesterday. Kouta told me to say it, okay?” she added in explanation.

“My pleasure,” I mumbled as I left the room. I had forgotten just how fulfilling being a hypocrite could be.

We spent breakfast playing at being a couple, saying “ahh” for one another and all, and then left. Once again, just as she had the day before, Mayu sealed her childish side away. Neither did utterance leave her mouth nor emotion show on her face as she walked coldly beside me. Idly, I wondered if an adulterous couple leaving a hotel might not act as we now were. I accepted that this was simply Mayu’s defense mechanism for coping with the world, and I, too, worked hard to walk to school in silence. At the stairs of the school, I gave her my hand in place of the handrails as we ascended.

The second we reached the classroom, Mayu bolted straight for her desk and hung her bag on the hook on its side. Bending over her desk as if kissing it, she promptly went to sleep. The other half of this stupid couple mused to himself that her manner of sleeping was a waste of her elegant looks.

No one dared speak to her. Mayu’s sleep was never interrupted until after school had concluded. With our homeroom teacher Kaminuma-sensei at the head of the pack, the entire cohort of teachers pretended not to see her sleeping. Mayu had thus never once been reprimanded for poor classroom behavior.

Should I wake her up at lunch break? Would I be allowed to accompany her on the way out of school? These questions ran through my mind as I rested my head on my elbow, silently watching Mayu sleep as she lay slumped over on her desk. In the

end though, I settled on acting as if she didn't exist, just like the teachers here did.

Mayu slept through the entire day, never moving.

The tranquil school day concluded.

Amid the hustle and bustle of students leaving, I checked the pair of handouts we had been given. The first was a message from the student council, while the other was a pamphlet regarding the upcoming school trip.

The student council notice was jam-packed with announcements from the diseased minds that ran our wonderful school. Yes, that means exactly what it sounds like. The handout included a single line of warning concerning the serial murder incident shaking up this country, which read: "If you encounter anyone holding something dangerous, please be careful." I wanted to object that the only dangers here were their rotted brains. Crowding the rest of this sheet of paper were the opinions, style, and "heroic story" of each respective member of the student council, ordered in accordance with the hierarchy of the body in question. The paper was literally covered with articles crying, "look at me, I'm amazing!" When it came to an organization like that, even were I a mysterious transfer student, I wouldn't have any desire to fight them. I folded the leaflet into an airplane and sent it soaring toward the trash. Score.

The pamphlet for the school trip, on the other hand, detailed the itinerary, suggestions about how much money to bring, and contact numbers; it was, in short, targeted at parents. After skimming its pages, I folded it once more and put it away.

In three weeks time, we students were to take a field trip to Kyushu. About a month ago, Kaminuma-sensei had carelessly explained that we would journey across the entirety of Kyushu over a period of four days and three nights. When I'd heard the news, I'd thought of the wave of teasing that would soon engulf Sugawara Michizane at Dazaifu Tenmangu[1].

The Mayu that usually revived once school ended showed no signs of returning to life, leading me to hesitate over what to do next. Weighing that thought against the potential retribution I would be victim of should I leave without her, I took the path of least resistance.

I approached Mayu's desk via the back of the classroom to avoid unwanted attention, and lightly shook her by the shoulders. This was, of course, the first time anyone had done anything of the sort, and so the curious gazes that found me were unavoidable.

Mayu mumbled incomprehensibly as she looked up at me with sleepy eyes. As she slurped up her drool, she slowly recognized me.

"…Mii-kun?"

"That's right. Let's head home, alright? Whoa—!"

"Yay!"

With a celebratory cry, Mayu leapt at me. I caught her with my entire body…

…and then Mayu and I kissed.

Now that was a shock. Exclamation mark.

"……"

A deafening silence filled the classroom, the only sounds coming from within me. The movements of my muscles, the creaking of my bones, and the scraping of my joints. The beating of my heart. And the sound of Mayu's tongue squirming, as if seeking all the saliva in my mouth. She caressed every inch of my mouth with her tongue, and slurped the saliva she had gathered with a lewd sound before promptly stepping back in a fluster.

"…Maybe I shouldn't have done that."

Mayu wiped the drool leaking from the side of her mouth with her hand. Now wearing a poker face, she looked up at me.

"…And it's good morning to the dawn of our new situation, I guess…"

I'm afraid I might have just built walls between my classmates and myself. *C'mon people, there's couples like this everywhere…* I wanted to say, before deciding that such an action would have been tantamount to digging my own grave. That's a lie, though.

Moving swiftly, Mayu grabbed the handouts she'd been given, shoved them into her bag without a second thought, and then rose. This was no longer where we belonged. Even if I had never looked to school for belonging, that was now no longer even an option. Not that I'd ever planned on becoming friends with locals aware of the kidnappings anyway.

I walked out to the corridor together with Mayu. Her mishap in the classroom didn't seem to have affected her – she merely calmly adjusted her unkempt clothing as if nothing had happened. Her attitude made it apparent that I was the only one to whom she would reveal her childish side – I was the exception. Did that make me happy? Well… let's just say yes for now.

On a different note, I had noticed something off about Mayu's bag back in the classroom. Once we had reached the corridor, I asked if I might look within.

"Sure," she replied, handing me her bag. The bag she placed in my hands was light as a feather. Inside, the bag was filled with discolored handouts; her textbooks and notebooks were conspicuously absent. Actually, they were probably at home, warming the floorboards of her room.

Sticking my hand in, I removed the handouts. Within the pile of papers I had just extracted, I noticed the leaflet that had been distributed during the school entrance ceremony. This had clearly been a pattern of behavior extending back at least to her first year. I crumpled the handout, intending to throw it away.

"Wait."

A voice called out from the classroom behind me, and I turned

around. Kaneko stood there, leaning against the door.

“What do you want, class rep?”

Kaneko gave a vague smile in response to my frigid tone, and approached us. He kept his hands busy by scratching his cheeks and then placing them on his hips. *If you’re so busy, then don’t bother us*, I complained inwardly.

“Not you; I’m talking to Misono-san.”

“What do you want?” Mayu reacted immediately upon hearing her name. She was not as hostile as she had been yesterday, but the impression left by the cold attitude she’d presented the day before lingered still.

“I’d originally intended to ask you yesterday, but what are some good features of our school?”

Mayu glanced at me for a moment before replying, “There aren’t any.”

“There aren’t… Huh. Yeah, okay.”

Due to this utterly ineffectual communication possessing all the substance of empty air, Kaneko revealed a pitiful expression. His drooping eyes stared hollowly through Mayu directly at me, who was detachedly spectating the situation – a plainful plea for help. It wasn’t just an SOS though; his curiosity regarding the earlier situation was clearly conveyed as well. I pretended not to notice. In a situation where a single “bye” would end it all, I wondered why he couldn’t say as much.

“Uh, well… You’re leaving me in a tight spot if you say there’s nothing. I need an opinion from everyone, you know?” he managed to squeeze out in reply.

“An open atmosphere. Beautiful scenery. Satisfactory architecture. Happy now?”

“…Yeah. Sure.”

Kaneko's expression did its job, fully conveying his regret in asking. Despite that, he continued, "One last question then… Are you guys, um… dating?"

His face lit up with a sense of accomplishment, as if that had been what he'd wanted to ask all along. Mayu's answer, however, was just as blunt as her others had been.

"And what good would it do me to answer that?"

"Uh…" Kaneko mumbled, having reached his limit.

"Hey, if you've got the time to be hitting on girls, why not go work up a sweat swinging a bamboo sword instead," a student walked out of the classroom next door and spoke in a joking manner.

He was both the student council president and the kendo club president as well as numerous other such things. This was Sugawara Michizane, a man with a stunning array of titles and a style of speaking to match.

He wore the word "omnipotent" like a badge. It was hard to believe he was human, as I was.

With the arrival of unexpected reinforcements, Kaneko's face relaxed. However…

"That has nothing to do with what we were talking about. Would you please refrain from such senseless remarks?" Mayu seemed incapable of recognizing a joke for what it was. Not sparing a moment's thought for those around her, her response had been immediate and hostile. A look of surprise flashed across Sugawara's face before he brushed off the comment with a quick apology. "Sorry for that," he said, before casting a sharp glance in Kaneko's direction and asking what he was doing.

"Collecting ideas for the pamphlet; isn't that the kind of thing a class president should take the initiative to do?" Kaneko replied.

"Just write that they'll get to meet me and include a picture. Problem solved," Sugawara said.

“Haven’t you ever heard of the ‘attraction effect’?”

The dumbfounded look on his face notwithstanding, Kaneko nonetheless began a friendly conversation with Sugawara Michizane. A wall had been placed between us. With a conspicuous display of human relations, he prevented us from trespassing upon his conversation. Without any reason for us to linger further, I looked over to Mayu.

“Let’s go home.”

“Let’s,” she said, taking my hand. Even after we had descended the stairs, our hands were still intertwined as we made our way to the shoe lockers.

The second we arrived home, Mayu leapt onto the sofa with an enthusiastic, “Let’s do something naughty,” only to drift off by the time I had finished pulling my change of clothes from my bag. Her sleeping posture was careless; worrying, I carried her to her room and laid her dainty frame on the bed. The thought of doing “something naughty” never crossing my mind, I tucked her in and left the room.

“I wonder how long she’s going to sleep…”

To my shame, I must admit I was completely incapable of cooking. Somehow I had to prepare meals for the children, even if that meant going without any myself. I changed out of my school uniform and slid open the fusuma door.

“Oh, welcome back.”

A voice greeted me. *“So you consider this home now?”* I wanted to reply, but I choked down my retort. Instead, I merely responded in turn, “Yeah, I’m back.”

The two were nestled together, just as they had been yesterday. The only noticeable difference was the blanket now stretched across their laps, as well as a now-empty plate which had once held their breakfast.

“Um, thank you for this,” Kouta-kun said, his bangs bobbing up and down as he bowed. Shyly, he lifted the blanket with two fingers and smiled. Anzu-chan was faced toward her best friend – the wall.

“Anzu, thank him.”

The older brother pulled on the sleeve of the younger sister, who scowled in discontent.

“Kouta, are you stupid? This guy is a kidnapper. Why should we have to thank him?”

Fair enough. Her rationale might have been simple, but it was also completely logical.

“But Onii-san isn’t the one who kidnapped us,” he replied.

That, too, was true, though it wasn’t a point I could simply let stand without comment.

“Just a sec. I want you two to think of me as the one who kidnapped you.”

The siblings looked confused. That was only natural, though. Common sense would make both Mayu and I guilty parties. Despite my kind façade, my tacit approval of the kidnapping made me an accomplice to her crime.

“She doesn’t need to thank me anyway – she already did so this morning,” I added.

“!”

Anzu-chan’s mouth snapped shut as her eyes gaped wide. What marvelous synchronization.

“Really?”

Anzu-chan, as if hiding from Kouta-kun’s gaze, escaped to the corner of the room. She was, perhaps, disgusted by herself, for her cheeks and ears had turned a bright pink.

“You guys are probably hungry, right?”

Kouta-kun nodded honestly. His fear seemed to have lessened, as his movements had become far less exaggerated.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you two to wait a bit; Onee-san’s asleep right now. If she doesn’t wake soon, I’ll buy you some bentos.”

As I spoke, I was inwardly deliberating between normal bentos – both in price and taste – only to be found at a convenience store some thirty minutes away, or the awful, expensive bentos at the local supermarket.

“Onee-san sure sleeps a lot, doesn’t she?” Kouta-kun asked with a wry smile. “Last weekend, she went to sleep on Saturday and didn’t wake up until Monday morning.”

If you spend more time asleep than awake, are you really alive? I wondered.

“I’m sorry to hear that, but things should be better this week since I’m here.”

“Are you going to live here, Onii-san?”

“Looks like it. I’m new here, but please take care of me.” Jokingly, I extended my hand out for a handshake. Hesitantly, Kouta-kun met my hand with his own; it was slightly grimy.

“Pretty dirty, huh… A bath might be… difficult. I’d like to allow that, but I can’t exactly let you run free…”

If they were to escape because I had removed the chains that bound them, that’d make me the king of fools. Unfortunately, that left me without any options, with neither plans nor inspiration.

“Um…”

Kouta-kun’s timid voice disrupted my train of thought.

“Onii-san, are you Onee-san’s friend?”

“Not eeben crose.”

I pretended to be fluent in English, only to fail miserably. I continued on immediately, pretending that that hadn’t just happened. “Friendship isn’t something I’ve ever felt for Mayu, and I’m sure that holds for her too. She’s just someone important to me.”

“…Those are some embarrassing things you’re saying,” Anzu-chan mumbled. Indeed, from society’s point of view, what I’d just said would likely be seen as embarrassing. If you asked me, though, my English translations were considerably more embarrassing to voice.

“In other words, it’s just like your relationship,” I said.

“We’re not like that!” Anzu-chan snapped, instantly destroying the happy look Kouta-kun had worn from being able to relate to me. Attempting to hide his loneliness, he forced a smile and added a “That’s right” to his sister’s words. Her words having affected him more than she’d expected, she awkwardly averted her gaze and went back to staring at the wall.

“Uh, yeah… That was a lie just now. Right, a lie. Mayu and I are just like a middle-aged couple. We’re different from you guys whose years can be numbered with a single digit. You’re like cicada larvae which have just crawled out of the dirt, while we’re like bell crickets. It’s not even comparable. Although male bell crickets get eaten by females in the end.” Feeling responsible for the downcast mood, I tried my best to patch things up. Naturally, my plan backfired. All I received for my efforts were a polite laugh of pity from Kouta-kun and an angry glare from Anzu-chan. What can I say? I don’t have the talents of a class rep; I’m just on the cleanup committee.

“*Ahem*. Anyway, did you just want to confirm whether or not Mayu and I are friends?”

“Uh, um, well…”

“Do you like Mayu?”

Falling for your kidnapper… Stockholm Syndrome, is it?

“N-No, that’s not it! Not a chance!” Kouta-kun frantically shook his hands and head in denial. Hmm, suspicious. Oh, maybe I’m the one he likes? Ha, as if.

Blushing to the tips of his ears, Kouta-kun looked down. I wonder what he thought about Anzu-chan’s cold glare? “It’s not like that,” he mumbled.

“She’s too scary,” he added, pausing a moment before continuing. “Falling for her is a bit…”

Then what does that say about me!? I considered asking hysterically.

“Plus, her screaming is a bit…”

“Wait, screaming…?”

His offhand comment drew a reaction from me. Nervously, he nodded twice. Anzu-chan also bobbed her head.

“How do I put this? She screams really loudly in the middle of the night. Not, uh, every night, though.”

“…Hmm.” Putting my hand to my chin, I pretended to be troubled. In truth, however, I knew instantly the cause – what society would label an illness of the heart. “It’s probably a type of PTSD…”

I wondered if her doctor knew; Mayu never kept her designated appointments.

“I guess the simplest conclusion is that she’s talking in her sleep…”

Such a thing was, however, impossible. Mayu was not one to wake in the middle of the night. Though she fell asleep easily enough, she was difficult to wake. She didn’t have the energy to speak, let alone scream.

“You didn’t know…?” Kouta-kun asked, surprised. It was only natural, though; I knew nothing about Misono Mayu. All I knew was her name, nickname, and pen name. Obviously one of those is a

lie.

“I didn’t want to know,” I replied. I wasn’t sure how much of that was a lie. The two merely made noncommittal sounds of acknowledgment.

Rising, I prepared to check on Mayu, but first decided to give the two another look. Observing the two from head to toe, I came to the decision to put my plan into action.

“This is probably a futile effort, but… Take off your clothes – I’ll give ‘em a wash.”

It would’ve been far simpler to have them bathe, but that was simply out of the question. The pair’s eyes widened and blinked several times in shock before they finally reacted.

“Is that really okay?”

“Is it not okay?”

Is it really that surprising that I’d do something good once in a while, you brat.

“I-I’m okay with it…”

I seemed to have scared him. Reflecting on my actions, I resolved myself to mimic the attendants of an international theme park, a land of dreams and happiness, and act more politely. [1.5]

“Please remove your clothing for me,” I said more gently, extending my hand. Kouta-kun handed me his shirt, pants, and underwear, which he removed with an abashed look. I turned to Anzu-chan. She wriggled uncomfortably under the cover provided by the blanket before passing me a bundle of clothes from under the blanket. I took the pile of clothing and left the room.

With the ball of horrific smells in my arms, I made my way to the bathroom and tossed the clothing into the washing machine. The water turned a deep black the moment it poured in, even before I added any detergent – their clothes were horrifically filthy indeed. Reluctantly, I fished the clothes out and washed them by hand

instead. I scrubbed until the surface layer of grime disappeared, rinsed them, and returned them to the washing machine, allowing the detergent and the machine to do their job. I watched for a while as I readied myself for the task ahead. Using the bathroom sink, I cleaned my hands of the filth that had accumulated, then prepared a tub which I filled to the brim with hot water. I soaked a couple of towels in the tub, and carried it back to the room.

“Here, wipe your bodies with this,” I said as I walked in.

My actions must have come as quite the surprise, for their jaws dropped when they saw me. As I thought, good deeds don’t suit me. Though it must be said that I didn’t have any talent for bad deeds either.

“Thank you so, so much.” Kouta-kun thanked me sincerely, as if he had forgotten the nature of our relationship. Hmm.

“I know; pretty gracious of me, right?” I joked.

“Absolutely.”

Wait, you weren’t supposed to agree.

Kouta-kun climbed under the blanket and began to wipe down his sister’s body; his assertive manner seemed to be the norm here. By the time the towel came back out from under the blanket, it had turned a murky ocher. Kouta-kun dipped the towel in the tub of hot water, and began wiping Anzu-chan down once more. I couldn’t tell what effect his efforts were having, but I could tell that he was taking extreme care as he cleaned every inch of her body, as a curator restoring a piece of art might. His selfless devotion made me think of mandarin peels.

I had a younger sister of my own, though it was impossible for us to have a relationship of the kind these two had, and we were only half-siblings. That selfish sister of mine loved mandarins – they were the staple of her diet year-round. She consumed them so excessively that her skin had turned yellow. Peeling those mandarins had been my job. Though I’d never once heard a word of gratitude from her, the memory of it now filled me with nostalgia

rather than resentment. It wasn't like I hated her, after all; I simply wasn't fond of her.

Kouta-kun crawled back out from under the blanket, indicating that he'd finished his labor of love. Anzu-chan's head, no longer layered in grime, popped out as well. I asked her, now dressed as a teruteru-bouzu[2], how she felt.

"Feeling better, Ikeda-san?"

Anzu-chan, eyes making her displeasure known, nodded. Quietly, she mumbled her forgiveness.

"…Anzu is fine."

"Anzu? Oh, you mean what I call you; is that really okay?"

"……"

Don't make me say it twice, Anzu-chan's eyes said.

"Got it. Anzu-chan it is."

"I don't need the -chan!"

I shrugged at her remark, so different from Mayu's. I appeared to have gained enough social link points to rise from negative two to the origin on the Cartesian plane. Next episode: I attempt to become a positive point on this graph.

"Stay tuned."

"Yes?"

I waved my hand, indicating to Kouta-kun that it was of no consequence. On that note, I don't think I've ever heard Kouta-kun addressed by anything other than his name; I wonder if Anzu-chan does it when they're alone?

Afterward, Kouta-kun twisted the towel, wringing the dirty water out, and began to wipe himself down. Unlike when he'd helped his sister earlier, his grooming this time was no more than a lick and a

promise, and he quickly finished.

“Ahh, that’s much better,” Kouta-kun sighed, a smile lighting up his already cheerful countenance.

“Glad you enjoyed it,” I replied carelessly, as I continued to study his body. His skin was a pale blue hue, but something else had caught my eye, something that had always previously hidden itself beneath his clothes. Bruises dotted his body; discolored, they looked like colonies of bacteria.

“…Once your clothes are dry, I’ll bring them back.”

I grabbed the tub and stood. I ignored the confused look on their faces as I fled the scene. Closing the fusuma door behind me, I quietly snuck my way across the floor, emptied the tub into the sink, rinsed the towel with cold water, and wrung it out.

“Honestly,” I mumbled to myself. *You sure brought home some troublesome kids, Maa-chan.*

It wasn’t my hobby to stick my nose in others’ business, but I couldn’t deny the mountain of evidence building before me – or the possibility of my involvement. This was dangerous. No matter how I might seem, I’m still human, or, at the very least, there’s still humanity in me. Although those are both lies.

“Those wounds probably aren’t from Mayu…”

Given what had happened last night, I wouldn’t proclaim her innocence simply because of some nauseating reason like “I like her.” No, what I found hard to believe was that Mayu would be capable of such rational violence – to intentionally strike only those areas that were covered by clothing was not something Mayu, with an int. stat of 19, could do. No, were Anzu-chan to show the least sign of resistance, she’d likely simply kick her in the face without a moment’s hesitation.

“…This kidnapping really makes no sense.”

When it came to the kidnapper in question, her only concern seemed to be me. Why had she even kidnapped these children in

the first place? Wait… that's it. I'll need an exclusive interview with Mayu on the matter when she wakes up. If I remember. It's not something I necessarily need to know, but better safe than sorry.

Time passed as I listened to the whirl of the washing machine and idly watched the ceiling. There weren't any marks that at all resembled a face; no, it was an immaculate and unblemished vision, perfect for kick-starting my brain.

Mayu's sleeping face filled my mind's eye.

That expressionless, statuesque face.

Asleep.

In my mind, she lay there unmoving, as if she had stopped breathing, her spirit entrusted to the land of dreams.

That she, filled with silence, would shriek in the middle of the night was…

True. I would witness it myself not three days hence.

It was a sound indescribable with words. A piercing screech that rent the air itself, so like the howl of a wild beast. Under the effects of Mayu's scream, the room itself seemed to warp.

"Mayu? Hey, Mayu!"

I raced over to Mayu's bedroom, a midnight infomercial playing across the television screen behind me, and flipped the light switch. Mayu lay in bed, her eyes dull as she wailed. I rushed over and shook her by the shoulders.

"IT HURTS IT HURTS……"

Endless curses poured forth from her mouth. I sat her up. As if in response, she clutched her head and began to tear at her scalp.

“Hey, stop that!”

“IT HURTS, MY HEAD HURTSSS!”

Of course it does!

Her bloodshot eyes stared blankly into the distance, white foam frothing from between gritted teeth. Thin arms – bones, muscles, and veins clearly defined – tried to force me away, her hair whipping to and fro as she rampaged. Her hand struck me on the cheek; her nails tore my skin, leaving a trail of wet warmth in their wake. Blood trickled down the cracks of the welt that had been left in my skin.

“IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTSSSS!”

“I get it, I get it! So calm down!”

My voice failed to reach her. If anything, my cries drove her further into madness. Somewhere, deep within my mind, I accepted that this was the nature of our relationship.

Mayu reached for her face and gouged the skin around her eyes with her nails. Displaying a frenzied strength that could easily overpower someone her own age, she attempted to tear her own face apart. I seized her wrists with enough force to crush her joints, and tried to pin her arms against her body. Even if I hurt her in the process, in the long run, this was for the best. Thankfully, however, it didn’t have to come to that.

“Uh, ooh, ooooooh.”

Mayu’s body suddenly gave way. Though her body was still stiff, its energy was now directed at holding down that which was driving her mad. She growled, urging her body to perspire.

“Mayu?”

I instinctively released her. With that as a catalyst, Mayu promptly

vomited.

As her limbs twitched, and with a horrifying sound, she rained gastric juices onto the bed, the spray catching my legs in the process. The room was enveloped by an acidic tang. Unable even to move, let alone to aid her by rubbing her back, I could only watch as Mayu continued to heave with tears streaming down her face.

Gagging and choking a few times, she vomited once more. Her bodily fluids escaped even through her nose, and her eyes rolled back in her head, as she wheezed and gasped for breath. Her body's desperation notwithstanding, she continued to vomit.

A moment later, she finally stopped. Without so much as looking up, she collapsed, face first, onto the acid-stained sheets. Finally, I went to her side. I sat her up, wiped her worn-out face, and gripped her in a tight embrace.

"You're okay now." As Mayu struggled for air, I spoke hollow words. "It's just you and me here. The people who were cruel to you aren't coming. They'll never come again. It's okay."

As I rubbed her back, she threw up a little. The lukewarm liquid that ran down my neck gave me goosebumps, but it didn't bother me, nor did it make me want to let her go.

Suddenly, she clutched my wrist, her unmanicured nails tearing at my skin, almost reaching the artery within.

"Stop," Mayu said. When I gave thought to whom she might be speaking, a few people came to mind.

What Mayu saw.

What she felt.

These were things that we shared.

We stayed like that for at least an hour. Tormented and shaking, Mayu never loosened her grip on my wrist. Its circulation cut off,

that hand had become congested with blood, and it was turning a deep, dark color. I feared that necrosis might have occurred, but if that was what it took to calm Mayu down, then it was a price I was willing to pay.

“Mii-kun, Mii-kun…”

“It’s okay now.”

As I wiped the sweat from her brow, I again voiced those empty words that I’d repeated a hundred times now.

“Your cheek has a scratch. What happened? You’re bleeding. Does it hurt?”

Mayu pointed at my inflamed cheek as she squeezed some words out.

“This? I scratched it on a tree branch,” I replied.

“Oh, I see. Does it hurt?”

She stroked the wound with her fingertips. I decided it was time to change the subject.

“More importantly, Maa-chan: do you have the medicine the doctor gave you?”

I spoke to her like a mother to her child. Lightly, Mayu shook her head.

“Why don’t you go see the doctor?”

“B-But I don’t like her! She’s always lying to me, so I don’t like her.”

I guess that means you hate me too, Maa-chan. That’s beside the point, though. I opted to give her the medicine I always carried with me.

“I’ll go get my medicine, so stay—”

“Nononono. I want to come too,” she pleaded as she clung to my hips. I patted her on the head, and gave in. I got off the bed,

carrying Mayu with me. I wrapped her hands with my own, like you would a child's, and soothed her by constantly repeating "It's okay." *I should've spent more time practicing how to smile,* I lamented.

We headed to the living room, where I pulled the paper bag holding my medicine from the back pocket of my bag. Holding the paper bag in my mouth, I walked toward the kitchen. I had Mayu, who looked uneasy, stand on her own before pulling a glass cup from the shelf and filling it with water.

"Here, you'll feel better after taking this."

This medicine wasn't anything dangerous. I counted out two tablets and placed them in her hands. As Mayu watched restlessly, I tried to hand her the glass of water.

"Ah!"

Mayu accidentally jerked the cup from my grasp. It hurtled downward, colliding with a chair along the way before finally crashing into the floor. The glass cylinder made a dull thud its final scream as it shattered.

"I-I-I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Desperately, Mayu pled for someone's forgiveness. Frantically, she kneeled, rushing to clean the fragments that littered the floor. I stopped her and, embracing her, rubbed her back.

"It's fine. You're okay. No one's going to get mad at you."

The spilt water flowed between my toes. I stepped back to avoid stepping on any shards, and patted Mayu's frail-looking shoulders. I pulled out two more tablets, neglecting the ones that had fallen to the floor, and placed them in her hands. I grabbed a new cup and filled it with water.

"Put the medicine in your mouth," I told Mayu.

Guiding her hands with my own, I parted her thin lips and placed the medicine on top of her pale-peach colored tongue. Placing her hands over mine this time, I tilted the glass of water into her

mouth. Her lips, pushed up against the glass, shook lightly as water poured into her mouth. Confirming her swallow, I pulled the glass away.

“Mmm. Good job,” I told her as I patted her head. Mayu clung to my body, burying her face in my chest. I emptied the remaining water into the sink and set the cup down. I dragged Mayu to the L of the 3LDK[3], and, laying her on the sofa, gently caressed her.

“Do you want to watch some TV? I’ll stay up until you fall asleep, Maa-chan,” I said softly. On the screen, the program had moved on from introducing an onion slicer to advertising a golden pearl.

“Mii-kun, Mii-kun,” Mayu called out. Her voice held not a trace of gaiety, only desperation. I stroked her hair in place of a reply.

“Mii-kun will never bully me right?”

“Never. I’ll always be your ally.”

“That’s right, Mii-kun is an ally. Mii-kun is an ally…” Mayu repeated in a trance, as if to imprint it in her memory. I didn’t interrupt. “Mii-kun always helps me. In kindergarten, he saved me from the bee. In elementary school, he saved me from that mean teacher. He’s always helped me. He will always, always be my ally. That’s why Mii-kun won’t bully me he will stay with me never betray me never lie to me.”

“…There, there,” I said, in an attempt to evade the topic… because, you know, that last one was a bit…

“Let’s go the doctor tomorrow,” I added.

Mayu shook her head like a small animal. She looked like a chihuahua. It’s impressive how attractive people look good no matter the situation.

“It’s fine. I’ll go with you. We can go on a date once we’re done.”

This was like convincing a child who hated shots to go to the doctor. Only one word of what I’d said made it through to Mayu.

“Date.”

“Yes, a date. You don’t want to go out with me?”

Again she chihuahua-ed her head, accepting my invite. The shaking of her head was even more exaggerated this time around.

“I want to go play with Mii-kun.”

“Yep. We’ll go wherever you want to play.” Even if the only thing around here was a park. The downside to living in the country is that there’s not much to do.

“So we’re going to the doctor right?” Since the two things were unrelated, that ‘so’ of mine didn’t make any sense, yet Mayu nodded. She’d taken the bait easier than a goby.

“Okay then, I’ll endure it. I’ll go see that liar. Mii-kun’s coming too, right?”

“Of course.” Finally calming down, Mayu’s body slackened onto the sofa like a plant that had been given an excess of water. She watched as the television screen introduced an exercise machine that allegedly burned twice as many calories as a normal one, then finally closed her eyelids. With silent breaths, Mayu’s movements ceased so abruptly it seemed someone had flipped her off switch.

I went ahead and flipped the off switch for the television as well. Leaving Mayu asleep on the sofa, I headed to her bedroom. I pulled the dirty sheets of her bed and bundled them much like how I’d found them originally. I took my blankets – thankfully vomit-free – and giving the room once more to the darkness, I returned to Mayu’s side. I placed my blankets over Mayu, and after watching her sleeping visage for some time, I wished her a good night as I always did. And, as always, there was no reply. I turned off the light.

…This probably doesn’t need to be explained, but Mayu and I shared a bed. All we did in bed, however, was sleep, of course. A healthy relationship. Nothing deserving of an R rating.

The cold air made me shiver a little. The cold floor was like the

shadow of winter. I sought escape through sleep, and pondered where I might find such escape.

“Umm…” Kouta-kun’s hesitant voice carried through the fusuma door. I turned, opened the fusuma door, and stepped onto the tatami mats. I pulled the string hanging from the low ceiling, switching on the fluorescent lights.

The siblings sat huddled together under the cover of the blanket with weary expressions as they rubbed their eyes.

“What’s with that stain?” Kouta-kun asked.

“I was on a merry-go-round all night with a hangover. More importantly, though, did I wake you up?”

“Oh, it’s fine. We’re used to it.”

“Used to it?”

It was a strange thing to say, plus it must’ve been a slip of the tongue, for Anzu-chan mumbled, “Kouta, you idiot,” and pinched his belly. Kouta-kun tried to hide the issue with a laugh. Again. Again I was overcome by the feeling that another piece of the puzzle had fallen into place. By now, I was ninety percent sure I knew what trauma these two had gone through even if I was a person who preferred not to get involved. I wished they’d stopped dropping so many hints.

I had to change the topic. I needed to throw off the inevitability that awaited me.

“It’s really surprising, though; we don’t get any eviction warnings despite making so much noise…”

Suddenly, I understood. To the extent that I wanted to strap a lightbulb to my head to let the world know I knew.

“Onii-san?”

I had finally grasped the reason for my sense of discomfort. Their situation hadn’t overlapped with mine, and so I’d been unable to

see what had been staring me in the face the entire time. This, too, was something we hadn't had to go through, but only because it'd been an unnecessary measure in our situation.

"Why *is* that?"

Kouta-kun looked askance at my question, which hadn't been directed at anyone in particular. Anzu-chan didn't react at all.

It was so simple, so obvious: I was having a conversation with these children. That meant that their mouths were neither gagged nor obstructed in any manner. That Mayu's rampage hadn't been reported might only mean that the walls had decent soundproofing. However, it was also a fact that the children had free use of their limbs. If they pounded on the walls and screamed at the top of their lungs, the sounds would likely reach the room next door. Were this room to be checked even once, the fetters which bound the children would be indisputable proof of our guilt, and the cuffs on their wrists would become ours.

"There are so many holes," I exclaimed in surprise. This kidnapping had been poorly planned and poorly executed. Just as Mayu had earlier, I felt like tearing out my hair. I didn't want to come to grips with what was quickly becoming evident was reality.

"So uh, you two…" I started, before stopping mid-sentence. *So uh, you two, why are you even here?* I felt like asking. Unfortunately, I had the feeling that the moment I voiced that question would be the selfsame moment that my suspicions would be substantiated.

Kouta-kun's eyes widened at my suspicious behavior. Perhaps he was waiting for me to finish. Anzu-chan, on the other hand, wasn't frowning as usual; she looked sleepy.

"Hey," she mumbled lazily. "That woman."

"It's not 'that woman'; call her Onee-chan," I said menacingly. How dare she refer to her as "that woman." "That woman" is my woman. Although that's a lie.

Anzu-chan complied without objection, possibly because I'd

intimidated her, though more likely because she was simply sleepy.

“Is that Onee-chan funny in the head?”

A statement shocking for its bluntness and accuracy. I hadn’t the least intention of telling her to watch her mouth.

“Anzu, you can’t just say that,” Kouta-kun scolded.

Though that may be, it was also the most accurate way to describe Mayu.

“It’s okay. To be honest, if you’d asked if that just now was a karaoke competition, then you’d belong in the same category as Mayu, you know? …But to answer your question, I think the screws are all there, if you know what I mean.”

I acknowledged the truth in Anzu-chan’s words. It wasn’t that I had a negative opinion of Mayu, though. It was a fact that I felt a certain amount of attraction to those elements of her. Mayu lacked control over her emotions, but it was precisely for that reason that it was possible for her to give birth to a sensibility that couldn’t be found in others. The line between genius and madness is paper-thin. It was hard to say on which side of that line Mayu lay, though.

If these kids got to know her better, they would probably understand too… But first…

“…All the screws are there, but something went wrong when they were screwed in. Someone interfered, you see.”

It wasn’t a hobby of mine to expose another’s past.

Despite that, for some reason, I couldn’t help but explain.

And so I exposed our past to these outsiders.

“Mayu’s parents were killed before our eyes.” My voice carried no emotion. It wasn’t like I had a choice: I didn’t know which emotion to use.

“I guess that was the moment when the screws in our heads came a

bit loose. Mayu's are loose enough that you can tell at a glance, but, in truth… I'm the same."

I don't find any fault in Mayu's actions, nor do I feel any guilt over it, after all.

I'd put my heart to sleep, that I might stay this way.

I watched the two's expressions. Kouta-kun looked slightly frightened, while Anzu-chan showed no reaction at all. Since their reactions were pretty casual, I decided to conclude the topic casually as well.

"That's why if you ever feel the need to speak ill of her, I would rather you abuse me instead. I don't mean that in a perverted way; it's just more bearable if I'm the one being bad-mouthed. Yeah."

I rushed my words at the end there. Quite frankly, I was embarrassed enough to want to dig a hole and hide in it. I couldn't believe I said "abuse me."

Now that storytime had drawn to a close, I had no intentions of starting question-time, but Anzu-chan, having woken up a bit, went ahead and asked me a question anyway.

"Why do you protect that Onee-chan to that extent?"

Because I like her sooo much. Because I l×× e her. That's a lie, though. Maybe.

"It's because she's important to him, Anzu," Kouta-kun replied in my stead.

Sensing that the conversation was heading down a direction I'd rather it not, I decided to change the topic.

"Some time ago, someone was asked a similar question."

"…? Who was that?" he asked.

I answered his question, taking care to name no names.

“A mom. She was killed protecting her child. Despite being so terrified that she couldn’t stop shaking, she made sure to answer.”

I paused for a moment, then – word for word – repeated the words that I had once heard.

“Because I’m a mother.”

The children frowned. Perhaps they thought my story had been made up.

But a lie this was not.

I remembered her mom’s words like she’d said them just yesterday.

That…

…was one of the few memories I had that I would never taint with falsehood…

…and also the primary reason why I protected Mayu.

Heavy metal blasting at full volume pierced through the doors and straight into my ears.

The only scowl reserved for this wretched choice of background music – utterly inappropriate for the peaceful daytime scenery outside the waiting room windows – was mine. I was, after all, the sole individual in the immediate vicinity. This building, which stood at the base of an uninhabited mountain, a fair ways off from the barely populated town, did not smell of disinfectant – this was a hospital for the heart.

A door, its white paint fading, opened. Mayu slammed the door behind her, discontent written all over her face. She collapsed into the chair next to mine.

“Hey. How was it?” I asked, raising my voice a little; if I hadn’t, my voice would have been drowned out by something else.

“I’m never coming back. I hate that liar,” Mayu spat angrily, not caring how childish she looked. Today, Mayu was dressed nicely in clothes that I’d washed for her, with a beret sitting atop her head.

“What did she lie about?” I asked.

“I don’t know. A liar’s words aren’t worth remembering,” was her cool reply.

Yet you remember mine. Though I can’t understand why.

After adjusting Mayu’s hat, which had slipped when she sat down, I rose from my seat.

“Could you wait for a bit? It’s my turn next.”

“Absolutely not!”

Mayu flailed like a child throwing a tantrum. In that instant, her skirt shifted, and I saw the distinct outline of a long, thin scar on the inside of her thighs. *I see you’ve been well. It’s good to see you again… not.*

“You said we’re going to go on a date. There’s no point in staying here,” Mayu complained.

Her brown boots repeatedly stomped on the floor, the sound echoing through the corridors of the hospital. That, too, was drowned out by the blaring music, making it difficult to pick out the sound.

“My appointment’s today too. Please be patient,” I pleaded, my hands clasped together like I was praying. Straightaway, my prayer was answered. Mayu gave a reluctant nod, her discontent obvious on her face.

“Then a date tomorrow too.”

“Okay.”

“And the day after as well.”

“If you’re fine with it being in the school labs or the gymnasium.”

And just like that, I received permission to enter from a girl who had no claim over the room in question.

I opened the creaky doors. In the room before me, a ponytailed woman arrayed in a spotless white coat and a blue miniskirt sat by the window, turning her gaze to me as I walked in. Her slippers lay sloppily on the floor, her legs atop the desk.

“She hasn’t changed one bit, that girl,” were the first words to leave her mouth. “She hasn’t changed one bit since she was a child. Well, I guess ‘Where’s Mii-kun?’ has since become ‘Mii-kun’s here.’ That’s hardly a change for the better, though,” she continued.

She yawned as she carelessly threw Mayu’s medical records onto her desk. I wondered why this no-good doctor loosened up each time I came to see her. Was she confusing me for some drinking buddy of hers?

“Just what are you planning on bringing that selfish girl – someone who forcefully discharged herself from this hospital, I might add – back here, ‘Mii-kun’?”

“Only Mayu gets to call me that.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever you say, you stupid couple,” she replied, rubbing her eyes as she swung her creaky chair around to finally face me.

Dr. Sakashita Koibi. A psychiatrist who was still single despite having turned thirty a short time ago. The kind of adult who only ever read manga.

“So what came over you? Revealing yourself to Misono.”

She crossed her arms and studied me from head to toe, as if appraising a piece of art. Her movements, as well as her intelligent and beautiful appearance left quite the impression. Too bad it was ruined by her bare feet.

“Is it alright if I only answer your first question?”

“Whatever. You always just lie anyway.”

She could see right through me. Since our relationship dated back to my days in elementary school, she knew me through and through.

“In the middle of the night, Mayu’s head suddenly started to hurt. I was worried, so I came here to see if you could diagnose it. That’s all.”

“In the middle of the night… Are you two living together?”

Dr. Koibi’s eyes narrowed as she interrogated me. *You’re a psychiatrist, aren’t you? Shouldn’t the part about her “head” be what draws your attention?*

“We just eat and sleep under the same roof—”

“—which is what ‘living together’ means,” Dr. Koibi finished.

“Given the limited space we have on this planet, and further, as a citizen of this small island we call Japan, in the spirit of efficient use of resources, we decided to share the same living space—”

“—and that’s why you’re living together. I get it.”

“…You seem somewhat angry?”

“Very much so.”

She tapped her temple with her fingertips in time with the music, while rhythmically tapping the floor with her toes.

“Not~” she finished, mimicking my usual line. From the anger I heard in her voice, though, it was likely that the latter statement, and not the former, had been the lie. She closed her eyes for a few moments, before putting an end to her internal discord with a shake of her head.

“I figured this might have happened when you two came in here side-by-side.”

“Did we look like the perfect couple?”

“Are you stupid?” she retorted. Sighing, she pressed her fingers to her forehead. “I feel like I just had my pet dog stolen by a stray cat,” she explained.

“How dramatic.”

“You were so adorable when we first met. Back then, instead of ‘Dr. Koibi,’ you’d call out ‘Doooctor’ as you followed me around like a puppy… I wonder if this is what it feels like to have a teenage kid,” she lamented. “Well, it’s your life, so far be it from me to say anything… even if you were to fester and rot. I do question whether such an environment is beneficial for Mayu, though,” she added, finally making a doctor-like comment at long last. “To be honest, the fact that you’re there for her isn’t an unequivocal positive. No, if anything, it’s the opposite. Give a plant too much water or sunlight and it’ll die, you know?”

“But our relationship is brimming with l× ×e, and isn’t l× ×e what matters most?”

“You’re lying.”

“I am.” Not for a moment did I believe what I’d just said. Dr. Koibi made an expression that looked one part disgust, one part mockery.

“You’ve made a habit of lying. One almost beyond repair. At least *try* to restrain yourself a little.”

“But Dr. Koibi, asking a person not to lie is like asking a soccer player not to kick something or telling a mountaineer not to climb mountains because it’s dangerous.”

“You’re perfectly right; I’ll agree with that. But that doesn’t apply to you. Both the examples you cited have something that makes them fundamentally different from your case. A soccer player chooses what they kick. It’s usually a soccer ball, but perhaps people or vending machines on occasion. That’s all, though. Even a mountaineer wouldn’t try to tackle a mountain of food. What I’m trying to say is that the outlets for their compulsions are controlled.

That's what makes them different from you. That theory only applies to normal humans, and thus cannot be applied to you, whose very existence is a lie."

She just casually declared that I'm not human. Was that an insult? I was having trouble deciding.

Deciding to leave that discussion for another time, I attempted to turn the topic of conversation back to the main issue at hand.

"So, about Mayu."

"Her hips were injured. Try and keep the rough play to a minimum."

"Quit making things up. The most we've done is kissing in public."

"That's even more of a nuisance to the public at large than what I said," she teased with a smug look.

Consequently, I injected yet more sternness and formality into my tone in an attempt to get her back on topic. "I want to talk about Mayu's mental condition, Dr. Sakashita Koibi."

She glared at me through scornful eyes, then spoke coldly.

"People are all liars. Especially me. Mii-kun is the only truth." Giving voice to the feeling of resignation within her, she spat out that sequence of words which hadn't changed in the least since long ago. "It's impossible for me to treat that girl, though I'll still prescribe her some medicine. Make sure she takes it every day without fail. Also, when you put her to bed, be sure to leave the lights on. That will hopefully put an end to those compulsive episodes of hers."

From what she'd said, I'd learned one thing: Mayu's outbreaks were out of her control. Since they didn't happen during the day, when she was at school, but only at night, they were likely the product of a trauma concerning the dark.

I see. I can relate.

“Misono isn’t conscious of the scars she bears. That’s why she goes to bed with the light off. Furthermore, I’ve only prescribed medicine for her twice in the past. I wonder how long she’s been suffering.”

Her tone suggested that she didn’t really care. Though considering how Mayu consistently called her a liar and told her to shut her mouth, I guess it’s only natural that she wasn’t particularly fond of her.

Still.

“Even if you say it’s impossible for you… That doesn’t necessarily mean that other doctors would be similarly helpless, right?”

The corners of Dr. Koibi’s mouth lifted in a smirk. That was, however, in no way a smile.

“Just how low is your opinion of me as a doctor, I wonder? I should really force it out of you one of these days. Putting that aside for the moment, though, on the matter of Misono’s treatment, hmm… You know, I wonder what it means to ‘treat’ someone.” Dr. Koibi met my question with another question. However, it didn’t sound like a question a teacher might ask, but rather one that had suddenly occurred to her.

“Doesn’t it just mean to heal a wound with medical care?”

“One hundred points.”

Her response notwithstanding, she sighed. Then again, she definitely did not say “full” points, so perhaps it had been out of two hundred points.

“Am I to take your answer to mean that to ‘treat’ someone, all that need be done is heal the wound?”

“I guess.”

“Then if the treatment which healed the wound also killed the patient in the process, would the patient still be ‘treated’ if the wound was nevertheless successfully treated?”

“…No.”

Without reacting to my words, she shifted in her chair and fell deep into thought. The fingers of one hand tapped incessantly on her crossed knees, the elbow of her other supporting her chin. She had a habit of tapping on things with her fingers and feet.

My existence vanished from her consciousness as she continued to be absorbed in her thoughts. Well, I wasn’t here as a patient today, so I guess I didn’t have the right to complain.

“…Uhh, I think I’ll leave for today,” I said as I prepared to stand up. Suddenly, Dr. Koibi spoke.

“I have something to tell you.”

It was a strange way to start a conversation. Her posture unchanged, she directed her melancholic eyes at me. Half-standing, I sat back down.

Her tone light, she continued.

“The two of you are suspected of murder.”

I nearly spurted something out in my shock, but I managed to suppress both it and the trembling of my fingers.

“It seems that there’s been a recent string of murders in the area,” Dr. Koibi, an uncivilized member of society for whom the television served only as a mirror and the newspaper as a weapon of mass insect destruction, proudly declared as if leaking classified information. Was I supposed to point out that she’d apparently been living under a rock? “If you encounter anyone holding something dangerous, please be careful.”

“…You wouldn’t happen to have been on the student council, would you?”

“I was never a part of anything other than the clean up committee.”

Huh. —But back on topic.

“And who would suspect anyone as clearly innocent as myself?”

“A detective or police officer, of course. Only someone that deranged could possibly enjoy a delightful chat with someone while simultaneously suspecting them of murder.”

“Indeed. So? Who is spreading such lies?”

“The armchair police.”

That sure sounds like neglecting one’s duty to me.

“Were you that friendly with the police?” I asked. I was pretty sure I remembered her abusing them to no end when she had been caught speeding before.

“Hmph. I wish you wouldn’t ask this psychometric mind assassin such foolish questions.” [3.5]

What was this liar going on about now? Heedless of my reaction, she continued to speak without a care in the world.

“One of my friends from high school is a female cop – not a sukeban[4] though; she’s asked me quite a bit about you guys. She’s always been a strange one. Even way back in elementary school, she wrote that she wanted to be a detective.”

Her words were blunt, without a hint of nostalgia. Perhaps for her, disregarding her actual age, memories of high school were as fresh as if they had happened just yesterday.

“She did say that she was the only one that suspected you, though. You’re only suspect candidates for the moment.”

Suspect candidates, huh. That sounded a little redundant.

“Oh dear,” I remarked, doing my best to keep the tension from my voice. “They must really be having trouble with their investigation if they’ve turned to suspecting such unassuming, law-abiding citizens as us.”

“There’s actually a lot of reasons to suspect you, you know? People

who've been victims of a crime in the past are much more likely to become criminals themselves. You're close to a psychiatrist. You have no social life. You're the animal caretaker at school. One of those is a lie, though."

Just one? And how are you mimicking me so perfectly?

"If you ask me, it's not all that surprising that Misono's suspected."

"How could anyone suspect someone who's that innocent, childish, and slow at running away?"

"You're not doing a very good job of protecting her, and what's with that low opinion of her? Anyway, she said she'd like to talk to you guys about it."

"Not in an interrogation room, I hope."

"Would a jail cell work instead?"

A joke that isn't funny can't be called a joke. Instead, you call it the truth.

"As a potential victim, I would prefer not to meet her, regardless of whether it be for private or professional matters." A subtle lie.

"That's entirely up to you, so feel free to turn her down if you like. She's quite an interesting person, though; she's a little like you," she said, a smile touching her lips as she spoke.

A little like me, huh.

…She must be a pretty twisted person then.

"The difference is that you only lie, but she weaves both truth and falsehood into her words."

"Great."

I'd bet on it. She's definitely twisted.

As the song blaring out over the speakers reached its climax, I rose

from my chair. As I did so, I was struck by a thought, to which I gave voice.

“Doesn’t anyone ever complain?” I asked, pointing to the audio system.

“Nope,” was her lazy reply. “It’s popular with the death metal granny,” she added.

It’s great to hear that it’s popular with her, but try to make sure her fascination with it stops at the music.

“What I play is by patient request, so the music’s generally welcome. Admittedly, when there aren’t any requests, I’ll just play whatever I want, if anything at all.”

“Really. That strikes me as odd, as I can’t recall a single instance where I was consulted. Not once. In any event, I had better go – I’ve got a date.”

“Lucky you. How about we trade weekends?”

“No thanks.” I turned her down without a second thought. I had no desire to sit in a manga cafe all day. I bowed deeper than I usually did, and quickly raised my head. Turning around, I nearly tripped on my own foot, but I nevertheless hurriedly headed for the exit. I placed my hand on the doorknob and paused.

“Dr. Koibi.”

“Hmm?”

“I’ve killed a person before.”

She didn’t respond. Maybe she hadn’t heard me? That was fine too. I twisted the doorknob and pushed the door open, stepping out into the corridor. Suddenly, a voice spoke from behind me.

“You lie.”

Never affirming her declaration, I left the room. On a seat in the corridor sat the death metal granny, humming along with the music

despite turning blue from a lack of oxygen. If she were to introduce herself as a ghost, it wouldn't have surprised me. Mayu, too, was there; asleep in her seat, undisturbed by the clamor.

"……"

I first picked up the medicine that had been prescribed, and then piggybacked her back to her apartment.

There, I kept watch as she slept, pondering the lies I'd speak once she awoke.

The Ninth Incident [the pensive murder]

A murder is a bit like an excursion. Or travelling even. By that, I'm referring to the planning stage when the heart is all aflutter. That's why I make sure to account for every little detail before I actually burst into action. When I finally make my plan a reality, all I have to do is entrust my body to my subconscious and let it do the rest. It's just more stable that way. Yes, stable. As people execute their behavioral patterns on a daily basis, it's only natural that they would yearn for stability. When it comes to the repetition of actions bearing considerable risk, stability is extremely important. For example, the buying of illegal goods, stealing, or murder. I am no exception. I desire stability in my life. Because of that, I thirst for a partner. I hunger for a partner. To find a soulmate in whom I'd find mutual acceptance – in whom the urge to kill would be almost as natural as breathing or blinking – was my priority in life. For years, I searched this country town. The inability to identify a suitable partner in this cramped world of common sense made the search difficult. Naturally, such a person failed to appear before me. I was not interested in someone who only killed out of malice, or who would only take life under the condition that they would not be found guilty. A person who would never regret a murder even if they were to be executed for it, or a person who killed when the mood suited them – those were the types of people I sought. People who adhered to a personal code. People who either lacked emotions entirely or possessed an unnatural number them. I desperately

wanted to meet someone of that nature. We'd chat, and maybe even kill each other over something trivial. Thus I decided to change tactics upon my arrival here. I decided to commit murder. I'd hoped to draw like-minded fellows to my side like moths to a flame. The results had been disastrous. I had become the primary source of content for the media, no different from a dog that could walk on two feet or a whale stranded on a beach. Were someone to mock me and call me a dumb animal, I would gladly accept. I would perform on two feet and lie on a bed of sand. Alas, this neighborhood does not have any beaches. There is, however, a glut of rivers. But let's return to the main topic. The man beside me is smiling to himself as he reads a porn magazine and is being terribly creepy. Seriously, though, back to the topic at hand. I wonder how long I have left. From what I had observed of the police, if this were likened to a three-minute match, then I would have more than two minutes remaining yet. Perhaps a fateful meeting may yet befall me before my time is up. I return the magazine I'd been reading to its place on the shelf beside the newly placed bentos.

Translator notes and references

[1] Dazaifu Tenmangu: a Shinto shrine in Fukuoka. The joke here is that it's built over the grave of Sugawara no Michizane, the namesake of the student council president.

[1.5] Disney land.

[2] Teruteru-bouzu: a traditional, handmade doll that is hung outside a window to invite good weather and/or stave off rainy weather. The comparison here is made due to the appearance of a teruteru-bouzu, which is rather like the Western image of a ghost.

[3] 3LDK: a home with three rooms and an "LDK" – a living room, dining room, and kitchen (usually not separate rooms).

[3.5] This references two Japanese works called Saiko Metoraa EIJI and MIND ASSASSIN.

[4] Sukeban: the leader of a girl gang. This is a reference to Sukeban

Deka (スケバン刑事), an old shoujo manga about a sukeban forced to fight crime.

Chapter 3: Lies and Lies

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“It’s getting cold.”

“You’re right. Maybe it’s already turning to winter outside.”

“It’s becoming winter?”

“Probably. Soon.”

“Will Christmas come even here?”

“…Yes.”

“I wonder if Santa will come again this year.”

“…That might be a little difficult.”

“I want him to come.”

“What are you going to ask him for?”

“…A lot of things. I hope he grants them all.”

For so long now.

It had been continuing for so long now. To the point that I’d long since lost awareness of it all.

It was what you might call l’harmonie préétablie, an unavoidable fate, something beyond my control which had forcefully entered the equation.

The last three weeks had been fairly unremarkable, an abbreviated

history of the fragmented memories of my everyday life. There had been no glorious events to rejoice over, nor had there been any lamentable tragedies to mourn.

Mayu, calling me a liar, forcing me to take a week off from school and go on dates with her under the pretext of making up for lost time.

Mayu, asleep, as I attended my doctor's appointments. Chatting with Dr. Koibi about manga until after dark, putting Mayu in a bad mood.

My struggles to get Mayu, refusing to get out of bed, to go to school, only to create misunderstandings when she woke up with only her skirt on, resulting in a chaotic situation that saw neither of us making it to school in the end.

I hope I haven't put anyone off by describing myself as retaining only "fragmented memories" despite my detailed recollection of so many things. It can't be helped. Mines is something of a finicky personality, after all.

In addition to what I've described already, during these last few weeks, I'd also played with the two siblings; Sugawara and his kendo club had had a stellar performance at nationals, all the while ignoring the periodic publication dates for distribution of the student council leaflet; and the ninth victim had been found.

At the end of these peaceful days, the sound of a phone beckoning me echoed in a room absent its owner; I answered in her stead.

"Hello? This is Misono."

"Why hello there. From your voice, I'm going to guess that you're not Misono Mayu-chan. 'Mii-san,' I presume? I've been expecting you."

"…Pardon my manners, but who are you?"

"I'm naught but a humble cog in the wheel of the police. My name is Kamiyashiro Natsuki. Your beloved Dr. Koibi and I are best friends."

So this is the rumored officer of the law… I see.

“So, Mii-san, right?” she repeated.

“Tawaba![1]”

“Mii-san the liar it is. Hello. I’m glad I was finally able to reach you.”

“Y’all bein’ silly now. Our talkie ain’t been outta range.”

“You misunderstand. Every call I’ve made until now has been rejected by a very lovely girl. For some days now.”

“Ah, yes. That would be my wife: I’ve taught her to promptly reject calls from suspicious individuals.”

“‘Please kill yourself’ wouldn’t happen to be her signature phrase, would it?”

“No, it’s ‘you are already please die’[2].”

“Oh my, what a polite wife you have. I am simply overcome with admiration. So, Mii-san, would you be interested in having an affair with me?”

“I’ll pass; I get enough of that already.”

“Then you are the enemy of all women. I would like to volunteer as your number three then.”

“You have attempted to reach an invalid number. Please double-check the entered number and dial again.”

“You are quite the unique person. I wonder who you take after.”

“It’s often said that I bear some resemblance to the child next door.”

“A fabulous idea for a drama. If you don’t confess to being the father already, I’ll be forced to take you in for lèse majesté.”

“I refuse, Kamiyashiro-san. No matter what the DNA says, his current father will always be the only father for him.”

“You’ve finally made me angry, Mii-san.”

“Sure I have. That’s why I can hear you giggling.”

“I’ll steal your girl.”

“Oh, how scary.”

“To be specific, I’ll go after her the way a pizza delivery guy would. Success rates are as high as with major leaguers, you know?”

“Then I shall instruct my wife to aim for a base on balls.”

“Now that’s no fun. Very well, Mii-san, I’ll have to go out of my way to visit you. I was thinking of meeting Mayu-chan at some point anyway, so this will be killing two birds with one stone.”

“…Fine. Out of respect for your enthusiasm, I agree to meet you. But we’ll have to keep it a secret from my wife.”

“All affairs are eventually exposed, you know?”

“By the way Kamiyashiro-san, have we met somewhere before?”

“A pickup line dating back to the Stone Age.”

“No, no, I definitely recall having heard your beautiful voice in the past.”

“What a coincidence – I was just thinking the very same thing. I’ve liked you since the first time I heard your voice!”

“Falling for someone’s voice, is it? Do beware of telemarketers then.”

“So where shall we meet? In thunder, lightning, or rain?”

“Somewhere dark.” [2.5]

“I see. Well then, I bid you adieu.”

She hung up.

Only to call back two seconds later.

“The department store nearest Mayu-chan’s house. This weekend at eleven, the cafe on the third floor,” she announced in a rush of words.

“…The one in front of the station, right? Then this is goodbye.”

I placed the handset down.

“Phew.”

Though our school trip was but a week away, things had ever been thus. Not once had there been a time when things had worked out in my favor.

After the call ended, I went and opened the fusuma doors of the Japanese-styled room. Following the changing of seasons, the room’s temperature had dropped noticeably.

“Ah, welcome home.”

“…Welcome back.”

The sibling pair sat on the floor within the room, reading manga. As I entered, they greeted me, their gazes rising to meet me. At their side sat a pile of manga I had borrowed from a certain doctor. Sliding the fusuma door closed behind me, I sat down as well. Aimlessly, I reached for a manga and flipped it open to a random page. As my eyes locked onto the page in front of me, inwardly I gathered my thoughts. To put it simply, I began to think.

Kamiyashiro Natsuki, a police officer. Her childhood dream had been to become a detective. One who wandered the boundary between truth and lie. A schoolmate of Dr. Koibi. In other words, thirty-one years old this year. That was the sum total of the information I had on her. Oh and, according to Dr. Koibi, she was ‘a little like me.’

Well, when seeing the Moon from the Earth, you can’t really compare the two objectively. Similarly, it’s hard to directly reject the notion that we are somehow similar. However, from the

conversation earlier, I had observed that she was a troublesome person to deal with. And as luck would have it, I now had the good fortune of having to rendezvous with this lovely lady. That thought couldn't possibly have made me any unhappier.

"Is Onee-san asleep?"

Kouta-kun's voice wrenched me back to reality. I closed the volume of manga with one hand as I answered.

"No, she's pleading her case to our homeroom teacher."

The two looked up at me, puzzled. These days, even Anzu-chan showed her innocent side.

"She's trying to convince him to change her room so we can be together on the school trip. I told her it'd be impossible, but she wasn't having it, so I came home without her."

She hadn't even noticed my departure so absorbed was she in protesting.

"Umm… So you left without her?" Kouta-kun asked, a hint of surprise in his voice.

"Is that strange?"

"Yes, since you're always together," Anzu-chan answered. Kouta-kun nodded his agreement.

"You're right," I acknowledged, "but spoiling her too much would be bad for her."

Mayu was a little too selfish. After these three weeks with her, those parts of her personality had grown more noticeable. For example, if I failed to listen to her opinions, she would sulk. If I spoke to anyone besides her, she would be bitter, choked with rage once I was alone with her. For Mayu, the optimal situation would see me tied to her with a submissive attitude.

"…I can't stay at her side forever. I'm going to be under the care of the police eventually."

I was a criminal, and punishment was inevitable. Mayu needed to learn to survive on her own.

And what that required was neither skill nor knowledge, but a resolution to enjoy life.

"……"

Mayu, I wonder if you have the heart to do that.

Kouta-kun showed an apologetic look, his shoulders drooping, as he heard the word "police." Anzu-chan, too, averted her gaze. These two kind-hearted children seemed to feel responsible, despite the fact that I was not referring to them.

"It's not something you guys have to worry about. Originally it's… it's Mayu's fault, after all," I said.

With that in mind, I wondered anew at the reasoning behind this kidnapping. Pondering this question had become a daily routine, though I had not once remembered to ask the actual kidnapper herself. It was low on my list of things to talk about with Mayu, after all.

"Rather than that, you guys, uh…" I started, before deciding against finishing my sentence.

Three weeks. They'd had three weeks to scream for help. At any point during the fifteen days that Mayu and I had been at school and out of the house, they could have easily screamed their way out of this prison. From my research of the building design, I had discovered that the walls were indeed soundproofed. However, unlike the bedroom in which Mayu had rampaged, but a single wall separated the Japanese-styled room and the room next door. They could have escaped their confinement without so much as lifting a finger. The fetters that had once bound their feet to the room's pillars were no longer capable of restraining them, and had instead been downgraded – upgraded? – to naught more than fashion accessories. Nevertheless, the two had clearly chosen to allow the current situation to continue. That said, I, too, had made the judgment that they would not attempt to escape and hadn't

bothered to take any measures to prevent such an attempt.

This incidence of kidnapping simply made no sense. Then again, trying to understand the mind of a kidnapper was madness to begin with.

“Um, is something wrong?” Kouta-kun asked.

I waved my hands. “It’s nothing. Anyway, a crime should always be punished. There’s no doubt about that.”

Though only if it’s ever discovered.

This had to be kept from the world, no matter the cost.

Otherwise, there would be consequences.

Just as there had been eight years ago.

“……”

A rough calculation revealing that it had been more than seventy thousand hours since the kidnapping, I nonetheless remembered everything about that time in exquisite detail, as though it had happened just yesterday.

There were likely many who had experienced far worse, but that notwithstanding, there was no doubt in my mind that it had been and would be the single worst, most wretched experience I would ever live through.

If only I could travel beyond time and space and find myself a trauma removal device. [2.75]

“Hey.”

Anzu-chan called to me, as if to a friend. Realizing that it would be simpler still to remove the trauma itself beyond the bounds of time and space, I turned to face her.

“Is it really okay to leave that Onee-chan by herself?” she asked, pointing to the partially-healed wound in my palm.

“That’s hard to say,” I answered.

The possibility that Mayu would grow furious at her request being denied, and that that fury would out itself as a physical assault on Kaminuma-sensei’s person, was undeniable.

As I’d climbed the stairs of this apartment building, I’d mused about how Kaminuma-sensei was a failure of a teacher who employed a policy of immobilism on various matters, whether it be bullying or students’ futures. However, if he were ever personally made a victim of violence, I highly doubted that he would hesitate in pressing charges. That was the type of person he was. In other words, he was the type of exasperating individual that made it easy to imagine that physical violence would be allowed if only against this person.

“It should be fine, though. To a certain extent, anyway,” I continued.

Even if she caused a problem, the fact of her mental illness could be used as a defense. If worse came to worst, she would be sent to a mental institution, a compromise I was willing to accept. As long as others around her were capable of restraining her, it would be fine if she lacked the ability to live on her own.

Anzu-chan suddenly raised her index finger.

“One more question.”

“Oh, you sound like a detective.”

Anzu-chan flipped me a look of askance in response to my teasing tone, then continued, “Where did you go last night?”

My eyes constricted and, for an instant, my view was enveloped by a dense fog.

“Kouta said that you were out a couple of nights ago.”

Like a rusty surveillance camera, I awkwardly shook my head from side to side. Kouta-kun’s eyebrows were knit in an expression of incomprehension.

“Oh, well, you know, I went to the local convenience store.”

Yeah, that’s it. The convenience store a half-hour’s walk away, with their fans running to repel insects.

“I was eating bentos at the convenience store as a midnight snack. I’m still in the middle of my growth spurt, so I have to eat every thirty minutes,” I quickly improvised, in an attempt to stave off further suspicion.

“They say that someone who calls someone else an idiot is an idiot themselves. But even if that’s correct, it doesn’t mean that the one who was called an idiot is not, in fact, an idiot. Instead, it creates a senseless situation where the one who was first called an idiot calls the other an idiot as a comeback. This situation I refer to as the vicious cycle of idiocy,” I choked out, nearly biting my tongue in the process. My abrupt sermon on idiocy netted me dubious looks from the pair. I had just made myself seem even more suspicious than before, hadn’t I?

“…Um, I’d better go pack for the trip.”

I quickly stood in an attempt to make a quick getaway, but Anzu-chan lunged as if jumping at me, grabbing a hold of my uniform sleeve.

“Suspicious,” she remarked with a mischievous smile. Her grin, suitable for one her age, reminded me of Mayu.

“I’m not suspicious in the least. Nor auspicious. As a friend of someone who is clubmates with the president of the residential association’s grandson’s classmate, I’ve been on patrols every night hunting the murderer. I’m definitely not lying.”

“…Onii-san. You sure are poor at lying,” Kouta-kun commented.

From behind his fringe, which had grown long, Kouta-kun watched happily as Anzu-chan and his captor joked with one another. Had it never occurred to him that as their captor, I was a potential danger to his precious little sister? The putrid virulence that had made a home in my heart was nearly purged. Innocent trust could torment

a soul as much as any touch on sunburnt skin would.

“Hey, what’s your name?” Anzu-chan’s “Q” was accompanied by a sober expression unrelated to her query.

“Uh… You mean me?” I questioned in turn.

“Do you see anyone else here?”

“Well, let’s take a look…”

I glanced about myself, a faint hope in my breast that I might find someone else. Perhaps a parasite within my body would present itself, volunteering to introduce itself in a gentlemanly manner in order to give me a helping a hand. “Allow me the honor of introducing myself,” it would say.

“I’m just asking for your name, what’s wrong with that?” Anzu-chan urged, since the “A” didn’t seem to be forthcoming. If I were to reply, “It’s a secret,” in a sultry tone, she’d probably hit me. Left without any other alternative, I decided to be honest for once.

“I don’t really like it – my name, that is. It doesn’t suit me and I don’t like calling myself that or being called that. So I don’t really like to tell people. I’m sorry.”

I placed my hand atop her head, on her hair which was far less oily due to the now daily washes.

“Anzu,” Kouta-kun called.

“I know,” she replied sheepishly. “It wasn’t like I really wanted to know, anyway,” she added, giving in without a fight.

I sighed, leaned back, and looked up at the ceiling.

“…I should probably drag out my suitcase and start packing.”

Suddenly the thought struck me… *What do I do with the children while we’re on the trip? Should I remove their fetters? If I stock up on food ahead of time, and warn them not to open the door for strangers, they should be fine living however they want… Wait, what? Have I*

already given up on this situation? Is that really okay?

That would no longer be a kidnapping, and instead, more of a sleepover.

“Hmm…”

Everything was beyond my expectations.

Although that, too, would be quite amusing.

Roughly half an hour later, the sound of this home’s owner’s return echoed throughout the home. At the time, Anzu-chan and I were pinching one another’s cheeks as we engaged in a profound discussion on the philosophies of life.

With footsteps so loud that I could feel the floor vibrating underfoot, she appeared behind me.

“Weucome ome,” I said, in what barely passed for human language.

Turning to face her, I quickly noted the complete absence of cheer in her expression. Not even pouting in disapproval, she instead maintained the statuesque look that typically adorned her face only while she slept. Without once gracing those present with that innocent voice of hers, she seized me by my collar and proceeded to drag me along the floor. Anzu-chan, who was still pinching my cheeks, came along for the ride. Unable to react to the sudden movement, my head slammed into the floor. Anzu-chan fell forwards as well, collapsing atop my chest elbow-first, forcing the air from my lungs.

“Oh my gosh, are you okay?” Anzu-chan apologized as she removed her hands from my cheeks. I attempted to give her a thumbs up to indicate that I was fine. My index finger extended instead, however, showing instead that I was anything but. Though not my original plan, I attempted to convey the sentiment through words instead.

“Gah, I can walk by myself, so please let go.”

My joking plea fell on deaf ears as Mayu continued to tow me across the room. At the step down, I hurt my tailbone and my elbow was smashed into the fusuma doors. On the way out, my eyes caught Anzu-chan's. She met our parting with reluctance, but my vocabulary didn't have anything for such a moment.

Once we reached the living room table, Mayu finally released me. I had the sulking Mayu sit as I adjusted my collar.

"What're you so angry about?"

Although I was a hundred percent clear on the cause, I feigned ignorance.

"I can't understand why it's not allowed," she responded.

Angry, she hurled her bag as she spoke. It collided with the shelf holding the house phone, causing the glass sphere beside it to leap to its death.

"Well, the groups *were* decided on a month ago," I informed the peevish Mayu. "Please tell me you didn't hit the teacher."

"A month ago… Then Mii-kun, you should've come to see me a month ago!" Maa-chan vented unreasonably, ignoring my question completely.

…I couldn't muster the strength to bother arguing.

"Sorry." I lowered my head in apology. Heads weren't all that useful; all you could do with them was lower them, think with them, headbutt with them, and eat with them. You really had to take every opportunity to use them to their fullest. That said, there was simply no way Mayu was going to calm down with just that. But, too dispirited to continue such a pointless discussion, and despite knowing that this wasn't the best time for a change of topic, I did so anyway. "I'm going out tomorrow."

"Then I'm coming with," was the instantaneous reply.

Never bothering to ask the where, when, or why of my excursion, she decided she would follow.

Was there any value in such an action?

“This is somewhere I have to go alone. I can’t take you, Maa-chan.”

A dagger-like gaze pierced through me. But taking Mayu along was out of the question. In order to protect these peaceful days, there was no way I could reveal the details of this outing. If I were to reveal that I was meeting a police officer, she would only worry needlessly, and if she were to discover that I was rendezvousing with an older woman, I’d be dead meat.

“I’m going back to my uncle’s. That was the promise I made in order to live with you, Maa-chan. I’ll be back by nighttime.” One of those was a lie, though.

“Why can’t I go?” Mayu pouted, a sign that her anger had died down a little.

“Because that’ll cause a fight. Auntie is against me living here, you see. Even though Uncle pretends he understands, he’s actually against it too.”

That was actually true. I didn’t need ESP to predict the outcome. I did not want them to meet in my lifetime.

I brought Mayu close and embraced her. I ran my fingers through her hair as she settled in my arms without resistance. I found a strand of brown hair and entwined my finger in it.

“When it comes to the school trip, though we can’t stay in the same room, we can still spend our time outside together.”

I don’t even have anyone else to go out with anyway. Hahaha.

…Haha… I want to cry.

“We already live together so can you endure it just this once?” I continued.

I rubbed her back much like one would for a baby. I breathed deeply of Mayu’s scent, which no longer smelled of sweat due to the changing of seasons. Her aroma reminded me of a stick of incense.

“Alright, I’ll try and endure.”

As a selfish girl, that was the extent of her ability to compromise. She hugged me tightly, gently pulling her hands against my shoulder blades. For the next few moments, we simply embraced one another in silence.

And so we continued for the next ten minutes.

“…Right then. Let’s clean up a little.”

My identity as a member of the clean-up committee prompted me to sweep up the shattered fragments of glass. I lowered Mayu to the floor and stood.

“I’ll do it,” she volunteered.

“No. It’s dangerous, so I’ll do it.”

“It’s fine! You stay there, Mii-kun!”

Mayu, so much like a princess in the way she liked to be clean and yet despised the act of cleaning, skipped happily toward the kitchen. She must’ve fallen, for I heard a dull thud as an elbow possibly collided into a wall, but she soon returned cheerfully. In her hands, she held a pair of long bamboo chopsticks and a plate. With the chopsticks, Mayu began to pick up the scattered pieces of glass.

Given her utter lack of depth perception, she struggled to pick up even larger fragments.

“Should I help?”

“Mrrrow!”

My offer was rejected with an intimidating meow, so I opted instead to warn her against picking up the shards with her hands. I lay down, my arms and legs splayed out across the floor.

The wooden floor was hard and cold.

And strangely comfortable.

My eyes locked on the cheap light hanging from the ceiling, I lost myself in my thoughts.

I thought of my lies,

envisioned my upcoming encounter with Kamiyashiro Natsuki,

pondered the victims of the murder,

and as if to chase all thoughts from my mind, closed my eyelids.

The residual warmth of Mayu's hands on my back was eventually stolen by the chill of the floor.

Sunday.

Outside, it was pouring rain.

A torrential downpour.

The weather report had claimed that it would turn sunny by midday, though the reporting weatherman himself had seemed skeptical of the claim.

"Hey, you don't have to go today, do you?" Mayu, so rarely awake by nine thirty, suggested after a glance outside the window.

"…Nah, I really ought to go at least once before the trip," I gently responded before preparing to leave.

Mayu stood there with a docile expression.

Since the department store in question was a forty minute walk away, I needed to leave the apartment by ten o'clock. After taking the black folding umbrella Mayu handed me, I headed toward the door.

"Ah, wait a second," Mayu called out as I put on my dirty shoes.

She quickly smothered her lips with a tube of lipstick she'd been holding.

Ignoring my confusion, Mayu, who'd dyed her lips rouge, sucked forcefully on my cheek.

It felt as though my skin was going to be pulled off.

"Ow, that hurts," I complained.

Mayu pulled her lips from my cheek before stepping back to admire her handiwork.

"You're not allowed to wipe it off," she commanded.

"…Not even the saliva?"

"No."

She pinned my arms and raised a hand mirror to my face so that I could see.

My cheek was embossed with a lipstick kiss mark, slightly thicker than her actual lips. The mirror also revealed a trail of saliva, dripping down my jawline to my chin.

"…Alright, I'm off."

"Bye bye."

Forced to leave in this humiliating getup, I left the room.

At a quarter to ten, I finally arrived at the department store in front of the station. The rain had formed puddles along the road deep enough to be measured, which had infiltrated my shoes and socks with a single step.

Though it might have been called a department store, it was nonetheless a building thoroughly ingrained with the smell of the country. Were it to be sandwiched by buildings from the city, it

would look as though it were the victim of bullying.

Miserable though the department store might have been, I was surprised to find all types inhabiting its spaces.

Shaking the water off my umbrella, I folded it and ducked through the automatic doors. The building was filled with cheerful music, light, and a cloyingly sweet smell – a glitz that drew a stark contrast to the dreary weather outside.

At the building entrance, I enclosed my umbrella in a plastic bag[3] and moved to stand before the building directory. Glancing around, I found the origin of the sweet scent: a store specializing in a product formed from the kneading of flour in water, and later fermented in yeast. In short, a bakery. The first floor was apparently dedicated to food products.

A certain person in the bakery had caught my attention and held it captive.

There she stood, devouring every free sample. Her unique appearance revealed her as someone who either attracted or repulsed attention.

She wore a long-sleeved, black-and-white striped blouse with a matching skirt. Her shirt was slightly loose on her figure, and her bra strap was visible on her exposed right shoulder. Additionally, her platinum blonde hair was held in place with an ornamental hairpin, in defiance of current fashion trends.

The woman seemed to have taken a liking to the bakery's green spinach bread. However, rather than placing it on a tray and purchasing it at the register, she doggedly and shamelessly demolished the bite-sized free samples of spinach bread one by one. She ate with such vigor that it seemed unlikely anyone would move to stop her were she to move on to target the bread on sale.

Despite my feelings of sympathy for the shop attendant sending pleading gazes every which way, looking for help from anyone contentious enough to intervene, I chose to turn a blind eye to the situation.

Suddenly, the lady turned to face me.

Sending the contents of her inflated cheeks on a one-way trip down her throat, she composed herself.

She reached for her umbrella, leaning against the wall, and approached me with light steps, her handbag swaying to and fro. Her blue runners looked completely dry, and were noiseless as she walked.

“Hi. I’m Kamiyashiro Natsuki.” She introduced herself with a gentle smile and a slight bow of the head. It seemed she’d already looked into the appearance of a certain Mii-san. That’s to be expected, though, I guess.

“Hi. I’m Mii.” I greeted the police officer dressed like a prisoner as I impudently examined her appearance. This new acquaintance of mine was not only dressed incongruously, but also had a rather striking face.

No, it wasn’t her small nose, thin eyes, glossy skin, or anything like that.

It was that… she looked way too young.

No matter how I looked, I could only see someone my age. Either this was a miracle of a makeup job, Dr. Koibi was the queen of repeating grades, or she was able to control her genes through a special breathing technique[4].

“Something wrong with my face?” she asked in provocative tone as she adjusted her hair.

“Well, if I had to be honest… It’s lacking in artistic quality. I was really hoping for something more avant-garde,” I replied.

“That’s quite the artistic opinion. I would have expected nothing less from someone who can shamelessly walk around with a kiss mark on their cheek.”

“Oh, this. It’s an occupational hazard.”

I lightly touched my cheek with my fingertips, almost as if to protect it from Natsuki-san's gaze. Even as one who lacked both a sense of obligation and human emotion, I nevertheless could not bring himself to wipe it from my cheek. If you were to ask me why, I don't know that I could answer you, though if I had to put it in words, I'd say it's because of that emotion which engenders attraction; you know – xx× ×. That'd be a lie, though.

"When it comes to shamelessness, though, you are certainly a shining example yourself, Miss Policewoman. I am astounded at the audacity required to not only destroy those free samples but to also dine and dash with the bread on the shelves. It's enough to make me question whether you're confused as to the nature of your authority as a public servant."

Natsuki-san's smile didn't waver. Her gaze dropped sadly to the ground though her smile lingered.

"I was rather overwrought this morning as to whether or not you would make our meeting, so my meal was simply too grainy for my throat."

"And so you chose bread instead? How logical."

"You flatter me."

Natsuki-san's chuckle was like that of the housewife from that famous anime ending. It seemed as though she might ignore the usual routine and simply continue playing rock-paper-scissors[5].

Ignoring the resentful looks coming from peanut gallery in the bakery, Natsuki-san and I ended our banter and headed for the escalators. It was unfortunate, but this being my first time in this department store, I had no choice but to follow Natsuki-san's confident steps.

Without exchanging any words, we arrived on the third floor and entered the cafe that had been designated as our meetingplace. The shop, its white interior coupled with the view of the sky, presented a world of monochrome.

“So there really is a cafe here.”

Natsuki-san nonchalantly revealed her lack of planning. I was having a difficult time deciding if she was joking or just an airhead.

After placing her umbrella in the racks, she headed toward the back of the shop. I followed her in and took a seat on a dark brown seat.

“A weekend like this isn’t bad at all. While my schoolmate, under the lead of a haughty and hot-blooded club leader, is sweating enough to make a profit selling salt, here I am, on a date with a woman as pretty as you.”

I win, Kaneko. Oh wait, he and Sugawara had been soliciting freshmen to join their club so that they could peek on the girls changing rooms. Also, it’s hard to identify any positives about this date with this beautiful, yet suspicious lady, so I guess that makes us even.

“Oh my, you might anger Koibi if you keep whispering such sweet words to me.”

“I’ll anger the doctor?”

Before Natsuki-san and I had finished our game of verbal catch, the waiter brought over some wet towels.

I was impressed by his professional air as his look of confusion at the lip-shaped lipstick mark on my cheek disappeared after the briefest of instants to be quickly replaced with a business smile.

“I’ll have some cocoa and Kamiyashiro-san would like…”

“No, no. Please feel free to refer to me in the overly familiar manner you use in your inner monologues.”

“Well, if you insist. What would you like, Geronimo-san?”

Geronimo-san covered her mouth with her hand in a graceful manner.

“I’ll have a katsu curry, thanks.”

Hmm? When had she swapped places with the person who had been pigging out back at the bakery?

The waiter noted our orders and returned to the kitchen, keeping his business smile firmly plastered on his face.

“So. Where were we?”

Natsuki-san smiled slightly and replied, “I was saying Koibi would be jealous. Mii-san has been her favorite for a long time now. Thinking back, this first love of hers dates back to when she was a senior in high school. He was only a junior back then.”

“Thank goodness he wasn’t in elementary school.”

“But the most astonishing thing was that there was another girl in her class who was also in love with him and it created a love triangle. All told, it was a rather pleasant school life.”

Pleasant? More like strange.

Natsuki-san chugged her glass of water down in one go, then wiped her mouth with the wet towel.

“Mii-san and I are both young people. That being the case, there’s only one thing for us to do.”

“You’re absolutely right.”

The Japanese of this lady in her thirties was slightly beyond my comprehension, but I agreed anyway.

“Mii-san, what are your hobbies?”

“I have to admit to being something of a spy camera of love.”

“My, what a refined person.”

Natuski-san smiled elegantly.

“And would you perhaps have a fondness for going on walks at night?” Natsuki-san asked without a hint of discomposure, her eyes

revealing nothing of her thoughts.

“It’s because I’m a country delinquent,” I answered carelessly.

At that moment, Natsuki-san pointed at me with a triumphant expression.

“Objection, Mii-san. This isn’t a court so I won’t be needing any proof. But even then, Mii-san, you shouldn’t be lying.” [5.5]

Does she mean that with regards to what I just said or in general?

Natsuki-san interrupted my chain of pointless thought by continuing to speak.

“Mii-san, you’re a country punk.”

“…You’re quite the detective. You know much,” I replied, raising my hands in a show of surrender.

“Then as a penalty, would you please reveal the real reason?” she continued.

Hmm, the real reason, is it?

I picked up my glass of water, and as my lips touched the brim, I took in my surroundings from the corners of my eyes.

Even if I were to tell her the truth, there was no way she would believe me. I mean, this was the owner of a brain that had somehow come to the conclusion that I was the murderer, after all.

What this person sought was not a testimony of the truth but conduct born of lies.

“Very well. Then I shall tell only you, Natsuki-san.”

“Oh? Was I not Geronimo?” she answered while pulling out a pipe of mint tobacco which she lit. An unpleasant smell which gave me goosebumps drifted over. “Oh, I almost forgot, you aren’t fond of mint, right?”

“Yeah. I hate it.”

“Let me put this away then,” she said politely before returning the pipe to her bag.

Is that her way of letting me know that she knows even the smallest details about me?

I waited until the smell had dissipated before continuing where we left off.

“My motivation for roaming around at night is simple – I aim to catch that murderer.”

“Oh my, I didn’t realize that Mii-san was an ally of justice.”

“Yes, in fact I contribute to society at least five times a week by keeping away from other people.” I continued my empty responses. I could not allow myself to make the mistake of having a fruitful conversation with this woman. “It’s the protagonist’s duty to clear their name of suspicion with their own two hands, don’t you know?”

Although I’m not the protagonist.

Natsuki-san’s eyebrows twitched.

“Suspicion?”

“That would be the emotion that Natsuki-san – excuse me, Geronimo-san – feels for me.”

Her face scrunched in a slight frown, but she forced a smile. She probably didn’t own any facial expressions besides smiles. Trying to express the multitude of human emotion solely through smiles sounds like it’d provide nothing but year-round muscle pain.

“What I feel… The word ‘suspicion’ has a negative connotation, and I don’t dislike you, so let’s go with ‘doubt’ instead[6].”

“Why, thank you. My feelings for you are enough to warrant welcoming you as my number zero[7].”

“I am overcome with emotion. But back to the topic of doubt, I believe I might have the slightest inkling of what you refer to…” Natsuki-san said, placing a hand on her cheek, and tilting her head innocently.

Would it be distrustful of me if I replaced her usage of ‘doubt’ with ‘conviction’ in my mind?

“It’s fine. Let’s just pretend that you don’t understand.”

I shifted in my chair to find a more comfortable position, and ending up leaning my weight against the chair back. Natsuki-san faced me, watching me through narrowed eyes. We locked gazes. I stared her down, inwardly chanting curses in hopes of turning her to stone.

“…My, my, even if Mii-san *is* a country good-for-nothing, to stare so menacingly at your date is…”

“Hmm? Ah, sorry. I got a bit too passionate staring at your hairline…”

Natsuki-san shook her head magnanimously. “I guess it can’t be helped. I can understand why you find the police disagreeable. It was Mii-san who singlehandedly solved the case eight years ago while we failed to produce any results.”

I felt like my stomach had flipped inside-out, and I took a sip out of the water in an attempt to calm it.

Eight years ago, huh.

I see. So she wants to start there.

“It was Mii-san, right? Who called the police.”

“You know, I just can’t seem to recall. All I can remember is accidentally dialing the talking clock[8].”

Natsuki-san gave my contribution to the conversation all the deference you would the pitter patter of falling rain, and continued.

“Mii-san, you were brave. You calmly escaped across a corpse-riddled ground to report to us. Although, at the time, you’d mentioned that your memories of the events of that time were, shall we say… ‘vague’? Have you organized them now?”

“I wish I could say that I have, but unfortunately, it seems that some of those memories have been lost. Irretrievably so.”

“Do you really not remember who the killer was?”

“Unfortunately not. Might I, however, suggest the admirable ending where suicide was chosen to ease the suffering of a tormented conscience.”

A lie. I knew from experience that *they* were incapable of such responsible actions.

“I see… Well, it’s best not to forcefully recall such things. Misono Mayu-chan is a good – er, bad – example.”

Deliberately dramatizing the pain she felt over the incident, she nevertheless brought up a name that was beyond ironic.

As I did not respond, however, Natsuki-san let the matter go and moved on.

“On that note, the murderer on the loose at the moment…” She paused for a moment, her default smile blooming once more. “The criminal in question is a high school student.”

Not “a student,” but a “high school student.” I see.

“And upon what basis have you formulated that conclusion?”

“Well, let’s see. The first clue that it’s a student has to do with the timing of the crimes.”

“How cliché.”

“All nine incidents occurred either late at night on weekdays or on weekends, with the murders occurring most frequently during the day on weekends… It’s pretty straightforward, really.”

“Perhaps it’s an unemployed adult simply pretending to be a student.”

Her eyes narrowed as she smiled. A doll-like gesture.

“Of course that possibility must be taken into consideration. However, is the murderer really such a prudent person? Considering the many crimes committed by one who is presumed to be a student, the police have vastly increased the number of officers on the streets during that time. Given that, a thoughtful person would have come to the conclusion that committing additional murders during this time period would no longer be advantageous. The opposite, rather.”

“You’re right,” I agreed, not knowing what I was agreeing to.

“From the sheer number of corpses that have been mutilated, it can be seen that the criminal has a proclivity for the macabre. There were, however, victims whose corpses were left untouched. This killer of ours sure is capricious, isn’t he?”

“I have no clue.”

“Giving neither thought nor care to his kills, this deviant murders as casually as he might participate in any other daily activity. Such a criminal, who clearly hasn’t put much thought into his crimes, would most likely be casual about the timing of his crimes as well. A murderer of this type would kill simply because the impulse struck them, simply because they had some time to kill – perhaps on their way to the convenience store, even. That is the type of student I envision this criminal to be.” Her soliloquy continued undisturbed, without concern for my input.

Did she really just use the convenience store as an example? She must’ve seriously researched every last detail of my life. Oh well, every man’s bound to have at least a couple stalkers in his lifetime.

“Do you watch the news? Or read the newspapers?”

Natsuki-san changed the topic, prompting a nod from me.

“Then you should be aware of the two most recent incidents.”

“I am, but not in any detail. If I remember correctly, the eighth victim was the president of the residential association, while the most recent one was a middle school student worried about upcoming entrance exams, right?”

Nodding lightly at my words, she paused for a moment. As I sat there, wary of the sudden silence, she unreservedly ran her eyes across my face.

“…Do you need something?”

“Don’t you ever get tired? Of, you know, being so expressionless all the time.”

“It’s a lot more tiresome keeping a smile plastered on your face all the time, I’m sure.”

Especially for me, seeing as I can’t recall smiling once in the last few years.

But back to the topic at hand.

“What I find particularly concerning about the two most recent incidents is the time the crimes were committed. Previously, all the crimes were perpetrated on weekday nights or during the day on the weekends. There were no nighttime weekend murders.”

Queen to H5, check.

The tense atmosphere created indicated that I had been driven into a corner. So much so that I could hear the sound of chess pieces being placed on the board.

“Now, if the criminal commits murder only in his spare time, that would explain the limited time frames within which the murders are committed. The sudden change in the timing of the last two cases would thus indicate a recent change in the murderer’s lifestyle, no?”

“Even if you frame that statement as a question, I have no way to answer.”

“Ah, my mistake,” said the person opposite me, as the corners of her lips upturned in a slight smile. “Though I have to say it’s quite strange to suddenly change lifestyles at this time of year. For the criminal, that is,” she remarked, meeting my gaze directly.

She sat quietly, watching me as the waiter brought my hot chocolate. She gave him a nod, despite the fact that it had been my order.

Raising the white cup, I placed my lips on the brim.

“I see you’re quite fond of hot chocolate,” she commented, as she waited for the waiter to depart.

“Did you hear that from Dr. Koibi?”

“No, from your aunt.”

A name I hadn’t expected left her lips.

“I’m acquainted with both your aunt and uncle. The connections in a small country town like this are really fascinating, aren’t they?”

“……”

“They speak of you often, you know, Mii-san. They lament their late nights working during the week. Because you are often out on the weekends, they rarely have time to spend with you as a family.”

“I should probably apologize for my part in that…”

So this is what it feels like to be a sheep being herded by a sheepdog.

On the other hand, there was no denying the joy I felt from feeling as though I were participating in a high-stakes negotiation between two con men.

“In particular, they mentioned how difficult it was keeping you from going out at night since they’re never home.”

One by one, Natsuki-san’s words filled in the gaps of a cheap, sixteen-piece jigsaw puzzle.

Although the image painted on its surface was already obvious, each piece was lowered into place ever so slowly. As if to mock me.

“Although their biggest worry must be the fact that Mii-san is cohabiting with his girlfriend. From what I hear, they’re always together, 24/7. As a single woman, I must say I find the situation quite enviable.”

She grasped the last piece.

“I would really like to hear about Mayu-san’s living habits.”

Checkmate.

From the very beginning, her thoughts had been obvious. Exposed. Annoying.

Running my tongue along the inside of my mouth, which had turned dry, I opened my mouth to speak.

“I’m sure you don’t need to ask,” I said, glancing outside, which could also possibly be interpreted as averting my gaze. Outside, the rain had slowed to a drizzle.

“Indeed, let’s end this conversation before my curry arrives.”

Natsuki-san’s flat gaze stared directly at me.

This conversation, its priority lower than that of lunch, was reaching its climax.

“You have recently experienced a drastic change in lifestyle, you enjoy taking walks at night… and most of all, Mii-san, you are a high school student.”

“…I see.”

Since I’m a criminal, that makes me a student, huh.

How efficient.

“Fufu…..”

“Fufufufu… Ahahahaha”

Suddenly. Simultaneously.

Natsuki-san and I erupted in eerie laughter.

Mine, long.

Hers, short.

We laughed until our cheeks ached and the customers seated at neighboring tables moved away.

“A most delightful game of cat and mouse.”

“Absolutely. I was this close to confessing to a crime I have no memory of committing.”

As if to release the mirth that had gathered in my heart, my shoulders shook exaggeratedly.

My conversation with this person was comparable to a game of old maid, and yet had been accompanied by the irrationality of only one side unilaterally revealing their cards.

It had been irritating, confusing, sagacious, and, ultimately, enjoyable.

Fun enough for me to laugh aloud.

As if to protest the rare occurrence of my laughter, my parched throat cried out for a drink. I quenched my thirst with a sip of sweeter-than-usual hot chocolate, bathing in the afterglow of this battle of empty speculation.

It had been, in the end, nothing more than a game.

Because there was no proof.

Had there been any, we would not have held this conversation in private, but rather in a police interrogation room. And instead of hot chocolate, I’d have been served a bowl of katsudon[9].

I saw Natsuki-san's nose twitch as the scent of curry, ignoring the current atmosphere, wafted across the room.

"Why don't we go for a walk in the courtyard once we're done here?"

Humbly, I accepted the offer that sounded like a line from a marriage interview[10].

That courtyard wouldn't happen to be surrounded by prison bars, would it? I wanted to retort. I kept that to myself, though.

Upon exiting the cafe, I was escorted by the intelligent (self-proclaimed) and beautiful (I have to give her that one) Natsuki-san.

"The daifuku[11] here are delicious."

"Western sweets are over that way; there's even a store that sells tasty fruit jelly."

"Ooh, they have samples of akafuku[12] over there. Let's go."

The courtyard, was it? More like the food hall.

We circled the area once, buying both Japanese and Western sweets.

"Have you lived with Dr. Koibi before?" I asked, guiding the oobanyaki[13] Natsuki-san had purchased for me to my mouth as we leaned against the fence on the building rooftop.

I'd forgotten my umbrella downstairs, in the cafe, but the rain had since stopped and I couldn't be bothered to go back and get it.

"Yep, back when we were in college together. We both attended a university in the country where we lived a debauched life together sharing living expenses. Oh, but 'debauched' in a good way."

Does that word even have *a "good" meaning?*

From the bag hanging in her hand, Natsuki-san removed another oobanyaki and took a bite. Her eyes drooped slightly, as if literally savoring a morsel of happiness.

“I’m surprised you decided to meet me outside. Was that preferable to letting me meet Mayu-chan?” she asked in a perfunctory manner after finishing her oobanyaki in two bites.

“Uhh… Um, well, it’d be troublesome if the two of you fought over me,” I squeezed out. *How unoriginal.*

Taking Natsuki-san’s personality into consideration, I had assumed that her reply would be along the lines of “Many thanks for your consideration.” Instead, however, she simply watched me in silence. It was abundantly clear that she no longer desired a battle of wits between the non-red fox and the raccoon that had not come from the future[14]. That being the case, I had better spare a bit of honesty in order to achieve my own goals.

“There’s something I’d been planning to ask you once we were alone,” I said.

“And what’s that?”

“The missing siblings case… Is it being treated as a homicide?”

Probing for answers from the police woman before me, I felt as though I were an elementary school student on a field trip to a factory.

“Hmm. It’s hard to say,” she answered, cocking her head in puzzlement. It was only to be expected that she’d hardly be forthcoming when speaking to a suspect who had potentially committed the crime in question. However, she didn’t stop there.

“To be honest, there’s a good chance the Ikeda siblings ran away from home.”

“……Ran away?”

“It seems their home environment is pretty bad. The parents often fight until morning, and the siblings were beaten on a regular basis,

as if to relieve stress. They've already run away from home on multiple occasions, so it's rumored that this is yet another of their escapes. The only thing is… It's been a bit long this time."

"On a regular basis…"

The information I had just received forced my lazy brain into action.

Runaways. Processing. A homicidal maniac.

Runaways processing a homicidal maniac… Why did I just connect those?

Let's not worry about that for now, though. The thing from just now is more important.

I need a way to defuse the situation.

The most abhorrent method would bring about the best outcome.

The importance of bowers. To hide a tree, use a forest.

If you ignore both logic and ethics, this is the answer you'd naturally arrive at.

"Whether they ran away, or were murdered, or kidnapped, it's already been a month. Their safe return is doubtful."

"Tragic." I gave a lazy reply as I contemplated the method that had come to me. Shifting blame, coercion, treating humans as pawns… I was a failure as a human. Looking at this from other angles, it was clear that I had opened myself up to a multitude of criticisms.

Though that also came with three positives: safe, easy, and fast.

"I guess from where Mii-san stands, this is a pretty big deal, huh."

What's that supposed to mean? "Yesu, zatsu lighto."

"Oh?"

A high-pitched electronic sound, a pop song popular some five years

ago, began to play, interrupting the demonstration of my fluent command of English. From the pocket of her skirt with the prison uniform design, Natsuki-san pulled a blue clamshell phone and flipped it open.

“My, how time flies.”

At her look of surprise, I, too, pulled out my phone and checked the time displayed on the LCD. It had been one hour since we had left the cafe: just past twelve thirty.

“If you’ll excuse me, I had better head back to work,” she apologized.

Where could she possibly be headed looking like that?

“I see. It’s a real shame, but I guess it can’t be helped.”

“After seeing how happy it’s made you, I’m glad I shared that information.”

“Please be careful and avoid getting arrested by accident.”

My warning was heartfelt. Natsuki-san accepted my advice with a big smile. What a comfortable atmosphere.

“Would you mind sharing your phone number with me?” she asked.

I accepted, and recited an eleven-digit number.

“Here’s mine. …If you ever feel the need to plead guilty, please talk to me. I’ll be waiting.”

Natsuki-san gave an elegant bow and began to leave.

Abruptly, she spun around as though on a rotating chair, and retraced her steps to stand by my side once more.

“I’m doing this for myself.”

“What?”

In a moment, she’d closed the gap, and with a single, swift

movement she pulled my head to her with her arms. Unable to react, my head was forcefully buried in a chest that couldn't really be described as ample.

"Mm, you smell quite nice…"

"…Um, should you really be doing this to a murderer?"

"I'm simply apprehending my suspect."

I could tell from her voice that she was thoroughly enjoying this.

I could feel goosebumps rising on my skin.

Ignoring my body's instinctive rejection response, I stretched my arms around her back, careful not to dirty her clothes with my half-eaten oobanyaki.

"…Oh?"

"Uh, because, you know, um, it'd be dangerous if you were to be stabbed in the back…"

Natsuki-san's only reaction to my incoherent response was a simple "Thank you."

As I lightly embraced her, I could feel the bones on her back. *Is this really someone who's eaten bread and katsu curry and fruit jelly and akafuku and prawn crackers and silky fowl egg pudding and matsumaezuke[15] and oobanyaki all within the last hour?*

Her fingers ran through my hair. As her fingers combed through my hair, she scratched my head lightly, causing goosebumps to protrude further from my bare skin.

"…So um, how long are you planning to keep me in custody exactly?"

"You're still under investigation. Anyway, you'd have to let go of me as well."

"This is, uh, well…"

Natsuki-san giggled, and then murmured softly.

“How nostalgic.”

“Pardon?”

Her hands left my head. She then slipped out of my arms and retreated a step.

As I stood blankly, unable to hide my discomposure, Natsuki-san covered her mouth with her hand as her shoulders shook teasingly.

“You’re the type girls like.”

With those words lingering in the air, she exited the rooftop with light steps.

“……Hrm.”

I grunted to myself as I turned to face the fence and lost myself in the verdant scene for a time.

After roughly a minute’s time, my discomfiture finally got to me.

Idly, I scratched my neck with my index finger.

What had just happened? Had she been trying to plant a listening device on me? Maybe a transmitter? Perhaps it’d been a physical exam of sorts.

I should probably toss my clothes in the washer and take a bath once I get home.

Yeah, let’s do that.

But enough of hiding my embarrassment.

I tossed the last bite of oobanyaki in my mouth and turned.

To find Mayu standing there.

Time froze.

Black umbrella, black sweater, black skirt, black platform shoes, black hat, black hair.

Her arresting appearance contrasted sharply against her pale white skin.

Misono Mayu was standing there.

Someone stepped forward, shortening the distance between us to about thirty centimeters.

Someone opened their mouth and spoke.

“Liar,” they said.

Indeed, I was a liar.

Somewhere within me, a switch had flipped.

Forcefully. In the wrong direction.

“You followed me?”

Something in me had recovered. The words had been mine.

Wordlessly, Mayu raised her arm. Not a slap, but a clenched fist. An action sluggish enough that I had time enough to realize that she was about to strike me. Did she really think I wasn’t going to dodge? Without bothering to chew the morsel in my mouth, I swallowed it with a gulp.

“Maa-chan, you liar.”

Her fist came crashing down, landing on my cheek and impacting my front teeth, tearing skin.

Another cut on the hand of Misono Mayu.

“Was it fun playing detective?”

Her fist was brought down once more. Her eyes, beneath the brim of her hat, sitting low on her brow, were like stone.

Her fist was painted a bloody red, a canvas of crimson. That which was not to be erased had been painted and washed away by the very one who had ordered it so.

“What. Was. That?”

“You shouldn’t call your senior ‘that’, Maa-chan.”

She struck my temple with her umbrella.

It’s not what you think, Maa-chan. This is someone who seeks to uncover your sins.

So it’s got nothing to do with cheating, dammit!

“Why were you laughing?”

Don’t ask a human such things.

“Even though you never laugh when you’re with me.”

“……”

I see.

Jealousy, is it?

Jealousy indeed. The emotion that I loathe so.

How nostalgic.

Ahahahahahahaha.

I tried to laugh.

I got hit.

I embraced her.

As if to push me away, Mayu thrust at my arms and distanced

herself.

“You smell like that woman.”

You’ve smelled her before?

Actually, I guess that’s possible.

“You’re not Mii-kun.”

“…Fine.”

Just like that.

Just like that, I’m no longer Mii-kun, huh.

If I’m not kind, I’m not Mii-kun.

If I’m not always paying attention to Maa-chan, I’m not Mii-kun.

If I’m considerate of another, I’m not Mii-kun.

If I’m not Mii-kun, I’m not me.

“I see.”

I glanced around.

A fence.

A fence. Huh.

It sure is short.

I guess it never occurred to them to reconsider its height since there have never been any incidents before.

I twisted my head around and looked at Mayu.

“This was for you! Because I l× ×e you, I had no other choice!”

I lied.

I lied. I lied I liED ILIEdiLIEdi lieLIELIE lieLIELIEMESOnge USOdakeDodIelüGeUsousO.

usodakedol× ×eusodakedoussokaefko°Cusousouosososossosodelete

deletedeletedelete

space, convert. CONVERT CONVERT CONVERT CONVERT.

I lied i lied I LIED. I lied.

Even though I lied.

“Idiot.”

You’re right.

“Liar.”

You’re right.

“Drop dead.”

you’re right

“Eh?”

I placed a foot and a hand on the fence as a pivot, and flung myself forward. Grabbing the top of the fence, I hauled myself up.

As I lifted my other foot, the world lost stability.

Not holding myself up with my hands, I turned around.

so l× ×ely

so l× ×ely

so l× ×ely

so l× ×ely

so l× ×ely

The l× ×ely Maa-chan's eyes gaped wide in bewilderment.

What do you think is about to happen?

You'll see soon enough, so you won't need to figure it out, Maa-chan.

You just have to watch.

Just watch, and live a happy life.

I pray for your health, for a long life for you, and for your soul to rest in peace.

See you.

"Bye."

Before a word could be said, I leapt over the boundary.

The most unfettered time in my life began.

Head-first I fell.

The blood drained from my head,

as I listened to the sound of the sky,

and—

Oh. I forgot a bungee cord.

I died.

The Tenth Incident [the questioning murder]

Due to certain circumstances, this murder has been postponed.

Translator notes and references

[1] Tawaba! – the death cry of Mad Gunsou in Fist of the North Star.

[2] Omae wa mou shinde kudasai – a pun on “omae wa mou shindeiru” (you are already dead) – the signature phrase of the protagonist from Fist of the North Star. If the English doesn’t make any sense to you, don’t worry – the original Japanese text doesn’t make grammatical sense either.

[2.5] This is a reference to a Japanese work called “暗いところで待ち合わせ(Rendezvous in a dark place)”

[2.75] A reference to “宇宙戦艦ヤマト(Uchuu Senkan Yamato).” To save the radiation ridden earth, the characters travel 296000 light years into space to retrieve a radiation removal device.

[3] If you’ve never been to Asia, buildings that are concerned with cleanliness will often have a plastic umbrella bag dispenser. You place your umbrella in a slot and it will “bag” your umbrella for you as seen here, which prevents rain-soaked umbrellas from dripping.

[4] A reference to a technique (hamon) from Jojo’s Bizarre Adventure (Jojo no Kimyou na Bouken) capable of many things, including preventing aging.

[5] A reference to Sazae-san, a long-running Japanese cartoon wherein the titular character plays a game of rock-paper-scissors with the audience during the ending theme.

[5.5] A Reference to Phoenix Wright, Ace Attorney. This game was also referenced in Chapter 1.

[6] Kengi (嫌疑) – the Japanese term for “suspicion” is comprised of two kanji with the meanings of “dislike” and “doubt” respectively.

[7] Number zero (zero-gou) – a Japanese term referring to a woman in a relationship with a married man who does not receive financial compensation and is connected only by feelings of love. This derives from the fact that wives are called number one (ichi-gou) and mistresses, number two (ni-gou).

[8] Talking clock (jihou) – a service, accessed by telephone, that will report the current time.

[9] Katsudon – a popular type of Japanese food where a bowl of rice is topped with tonkatsu, egg, and other ingredients. It has become a trope that katsudon is served during police interrogations, prompting confessions. See here for more information.

[10] Miai – a traditional Japanese matchmaking custom. It is customary for participants to meet over refreshments before leaving the miai setting for a walk or similar activity with the goal of getting acquainted.

[11] Daifuku – a Japanese confection consisting of a small piece of mochi with a sweet filling.

[12] Akafuku mochi – a Japanese confection native to Ise City in the Mie prefecture. More specifically “a famous confection of rice cake shaped to look like a stone from the bed of the Isuzu River, then, to express the flow of the sacred stream, three ridges of bean paste are applied to top of the ‘stone.’” (Source)

[13] Oobanyaki (also known as imagawayaki) – a Japanese dessert “made of batter in a special pan […] and filled with sweet azuki bean paste.” (Source) Oobanyaki is largely known as imagawayaki, but is called oobanyaki in the Kansai region.

[14] Akai Kitsune & Doraemon – Akai Kitsune is a brand of Japanese instant noodles whose name translates to “red fox.” The ‘raccoon

that didn't come from the future' is a reference to Doraemon, an anime about a cat robot from the future who is often mistaken for a tanuki (Japanese raccoon dog) due to his appearance. The tanuki and kitsune are rival magical creatures from Japanese folklore. Known for their trickery and cunning, confrontations between them involved a battle of wits rather than of force. (Source)

[15] Matsumaezuke – a Japanese dish consisting of various pickled ingredients. See here for more details.